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CRADLED IN A STORM

LONDON: SPENCER BLACKETT

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A STORY OF GAUNCHESTER-HAUGH

BY

THEODORE A. THARP

AUTHOR OF "THE SWORD OF DAMOCLES," 3 VOLS. ETC. ETC.

LONDON

SPENCER BLACKETT

(Successor to J. & R. Maxwell)

MILTON HOUSE, 35, ST. BRIDE STREET, LUDGATE CIRCUS, E.C.

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Dedicated

WITH MUCH AFFECTION TO

E. M. P.

A PRINCESS OF SISTERS

A STORY OF GAUNCHESTER-HAUGH

HOW IT GOT INTO PRINT

"WELL, of all the extraordinary tales I ever heard, commend me to that," I said, as my friend concluded what he had been telling me, and what he had promised to tell me some time before, but had been prevented.

"There you are, then—put it on paper; you are welcome to it," said he.

"But, my dear fellow, why don't you? It would certainly be worth your while——"

"No, no; I'm no hand with the pen. You are an author; you use it; I am free to give you permission now; and if it turns up trumps, so much the better."

"Well, thank you, then I will. I shall tell it as nearly as possible as I have heard it from you."

"At any rate, you can write with the courage of conviction—the conviction of truth."

Yes, I felt that: I knew he was not a man to exaggerate, and that he had his facts from the best authorities, the central figures themselves.

Consequently, this strange story is submitted to the reading Public with a warranty which may possibly give it additional interest.

T. A. T.

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CRADLED IN A STORM

Prologue

CHAPTER I.

IN THE STILLY NIGHT

Such was the mansion where the great man dwelt,
A widower and childless; and he felt
The loneliness, the uncongenial gloom,
That like a presence haunted every room;
For though not given to weakness, he could feel
The pain of wounds, that ache because they heal.

GAUNCHESTER-HAUGH stood in the midst of a low-lying tract of flat sward-land, close to a winding river—hence the latter part of its name. The river was deep and sullen, and crawled sluggishly down to the sea between rugged banks, which, for the most part, hid it from view. Its waters were shadowed by overhanging woods and giant alders, far along its tortuous line, both to east and west of the mansion.

There was a weird style of beauty about Gaunchester-Haugh, an old-world look, which gave it a charm, investing it with the glamour of mystery and age. The house was Elizabethan; its several gables, thickly covered with ivy,

which rounded off the vertical angles and crept up into the crooked chimney-stacks, making the old building look like a vast bower of evergreens. Most of the latticed windows were choked with the ubiquitous creeper, which, together with the deep shade of hoary, lichen-covered elms standing around, kept out the light, and rendered the interior of the house gloomy on the brightest day.

The soil was heavy and fertile; there was an overgrowth of luxuriant vegetation on every hand; an unkempt look about the lawn, the shrubberies, the paths, and the trailing rose-bushes which sprawled over the half-weeded flower-beds; the gravel-drive in front of the house was encrusted and gangrened with damp, and besprinkled with grass-tufts; the sun-dial was clad in velvet green; moss also grew in the corners of the doorsteps and on the sides of the casements and window-sills. Yet the place was not uninhabited, and the owner was at home. It was simply degenerating into a howling wilderness from indifference and neglect.

General Crutwell was that owner; a Waterloo veteran, who had retired from the world when he retired from the service, having seen a great deal of both, and more than enough of the former to disgust him for life. He now lived, or rather vegetated, as a misanthropic recluse, "the world forgetting, by the world forgot," and refused all intercourse with his neighbours. He was not an old man at this preliminary period of the story—barely fifty-five; but the last ten years had ploughed deep into his face, and aged him so that he looked nearer seventy. In that bitterly eventful decade of his life he had been dishonoured, robbed, and stricken with grief. No wonder he had forsworn the world, its pomps and vanities, its deceits and hollow pleasures. But he had done more, as if in penance for the sins of others; he had become a

mortifier of the flesh—an ascetic hermit and miser, denying himself many of the ordinary luxuries of a gentleman, and crowning his lonely misery with self-privations and discomfort.

The General's staff of servants was limited to three—Scroils, his butler and factotum; Harriet, wife of the latter, acting as housekeeper, cook, and maid-of-all-work; and Nathan Slugg, an apathetic gardener, who lodged as an indoor servant—altogether a gloomy household in a gloomy house, with no young faces to brighten it. The gardener, Nathan, as he preferred to be called, perhaps considering his patronymic of Slugg as rather a reflection of his true character, was utterly incompetent to contend single-handed against Nature on that prolific soil; so, finding he had always more to do than he could manage, ended in doing nothing, and allowed the premises to run wild without fear of reproof or remonstrance.

Peter Scroils was an old soldier, who had served with his master through several campaigns, and in earlier years had acted as his bâtman when the General was a Captain commanding his company. He had seen that master under the enemy's fire unblanched and steady as a rock, and he had seen him under the fires of sorrow withered and bowed to the ground. He knew all the painful secrets of his heart; but the past was a sealed book to both. General Crutwell was not one to invite confidence, and the faithful Scroils knew his place better than to speak on such matters unless spoken to; so the events of those ten years were never alluded to, and remained buried in the tomb of silence.

Although General Crutwell had cut himself off from the world and civilisation, the formalities of a gentleman's house were ever strictly observed at Gaunchester-Haugh. Each night the gong sounded for dinner, and each night

the tall, spare figure of the old soldier, erect and military in carriage, and invariably attired in evening dress, came down the stairs and went into his study on the opposite side of the hall to the dining-room, and there awaited the butler's announcement that "dinner was on the table."

And a ghost of a banquet it was to which the grave, silent master of the house sat down every evening; a truly frugal repast—a mockery on the name of dinner, and seeming the greater mockery from the stiff ceremony attending it. But Harriet had standing orders as to her catering, and never presumed to exceed them.

A tedious, lugubrious affair was that formal meal in the dark, oak-panelled dining-room—a gloomy room at any time—less so now, perhaps, in the evening light of summer than in winter, with a dimly-burning moderator lamp upon the table and not even a candle on the sideboard; the butler, in his noiseless shoes, stalking around like a phantom; the General never opening his lips except to admit food, which he ate slowly, sparingly, with automatical movements—the more slowly, too, since he was handicapped by the loss of one arm, the left, shot off at Waterloo, and now represented by a looped-up sleeve. With some dexterity from custom he used a scimitar-shaped knife, the curve of which was adapted to cutting up his meat with one hand, whilst the point did duty for a fork. But it was a long, solemn process, and Scroils was always glad when it was over, and when the tall form of his master rose from the table and marched back into the study. There the old General sat poring over abstruse literature till twelve o'clock at night, without even the solace of a cigar, a cup of coffee, or a modest glass of whisky-and-water. In fact, his only stimulant was a little light claret at dinner; his only extravagance, that of burning the midnight oil. He read to forget, not what he read, but what

he had suffered of late years; and while he studied, an even sterner look than at other times pervaded his sharp-featured visage.

His was not a handsome face, though aristocratic and soldier-like; there was a gaunt, wolfish look about it—gaunt like his frame, attenuated by scanty fare and mental wear and tear. He was close-shaven, and wore his grizzled hair cut short. His thick eyebrows hung like eaves over his black, flashing eyes; his nose was long, and straight, and thin, with dilating nostrils; his mouth hard, lips compressed—the upper seamed by the sabre of a French cuirassier. Taking him altogether, General Crutwell was of a repellent aspect—not the sort of man you would care to make a friend of, still less an enemy.

It is summer—a warm, still night in July—yet the master of Gaunchester-Haugh is not tempted to step out into the sweet air, laden with the scent of clover from adjacent meadows, nor to take a stroll through the romantic grounds. No; he pores on and on over those musty books by the light of a green-shaded reading-lamp placed on a table near the window, which is open, and reaches to the ground. It is dark outside; an infant moon and a few hazy stars relieve the sable awning of the heavens, but throw little light upon the floor of the earth. Not a rustle disturbs the stillness of the night; everything is asleep; all is perfectly quiet and silent.

> So silent is it everywhere—
> So silent you can hear the mouse
> Run and rummage along the beams
> Behind the wainscot of the wall.

But by-and-by, as it draws near midnight, something seems to disturb the studies of the General. Two or three times he looks up quickly from his books. Is it at some sound he hears, or at some thought that strikes him?

"Ha! What's that? Great heavens! what's that?"

He starts up from his chair, and nearly overturns the lamp in his sudden movement of alarm—alarmed, and very naturally, for at that moment the still night is ringing with frightful shrieks, the shrieks of some one in terror or agony, and at the same time the guttural snarling and worrying sound of some savage beast is heard close by—somewhere out in the grounds amongst the shrubberies.

"Help, help! Valdor! Valdor! Help!"

The screams rise higher and higher, the deep snarls and growls louder and fiercer.

"Merciful heavens! who is it? What is it?"

The General pauses to listen for one instant; then, snatching up a stout stick from a corner of the room, darts out into the semi-darkness, in the direction whence these terrible noises seem to come.

CHAPTER II.

THE WATCH-DOGS AND THEIR PREY

THE frantic screams suddenly ceased, but the furious savaging still continued. Guided by the tumult, General Crutwell made his way to a spot on the further side of the wide lawn, where he discerned a motionless body stretched out upon the dewy grass, and beside it two huge dogs locked in mortal strife.

The dogs were his own, as he realised at once. By a whim of their master's, they were let loose at nine o'clock every night to keep off thieves; not that the neighbour-

hood, far away as it was from any large town, was ill-famed for burglars, but General Crutwell had a monomaniacal dread of being robbed. No prowling felon, however, had yet come near Gaunchester-Haugh; and had any done so by chance, he would have found two formidable watchmen on the alert somewhere in the sequestered walks surrounding the house—one a savage young mastiff, the other a powerful wolf-hound, an old pet of the General's, which he had brought over with him from the Pyrenees.

Now at last this four-footed night-patrol had caught some intruder, and, having apparently worried their victim to death, were fighting over the body, and tearing the life out of each other. Who was that victim? A woman, as the General, to his horror and amazement, could see by the dim light of the blurred moon and stars—an uncertain light which filled the atmosphere with a spectral haze. He struck at the hounds with his bludgeon, but failed to separate them; and then, more concerned for the fate of the luckless person who had fallen under their fangs, paid no further heed to them, but leant over the prostrate body, and called loudly to his servants for help.

But the woman, whoever she was, was still alive, as he discovered from her low moaning, which above the horrid noise of the dogs he could not hear until he stooped down close to her. But though not dead, she was quite unconscious, and lay there weltering in her blood, which smothered her face and rendered her features unrecognisable—her throat and hands lacerated by the dogs' teeth, and the bosom of her dress torn open. Again the General shouted out to his servants, and presently the dancing gleam of a lantern was seen approaching from the house, and in another half-minute Scroils and the gardener came running to the spot.

Meanwhile, the fierce struggle between the hounds

raged on. With muffled roars they rolled over and over on the turf in a confused heap—an indistinct jumble in that weird light. But suddenly the fight came to an end. One had the other down in a gurgling death-grapple, and in a few minutes was mauling at the unresisting carcase of the vanquished.

The hyæna-like jaws of the wolf-hound had throttled the life out of the young mastiff, which, though ferocious as a maddened tiger, had not attained its full strength, and so succumbed to its older and tougher antagonist.

"Here, Scroils, quick! call Harriet!" cried the General, still bending anxiously over the mangled form of the unfortunate woman. "These dogs have half killed some one."

"Bless me! who, sir?" exclaimed the butler, in consternation. "Ah, dear, dear, I was afraid those awful screams meant mischief."

"Then why didn't you come out quicker?"

"I only waited for the lantern, sir. Ha! mercy on us, it's a woman! What could she be doin' out here this time o' night?"

"Um—bad job, bad job!" muttered the gardener. "'Fernal darvils! I knew they'd murder some 'ut." Then as the light of the lantern fell upon the dress of the prostrate person, Nathan added in astonishment: "Why, heart alive, sir! it's a lady, sure-li."

"Yes, that it is, sir! a lady, and no mistake," observed Scroils. "Who on earth can it be?"

"How should I know?" cried the General impatiently. "Don't stand talking there. Take her into the house, and call your wife."

"Hey! get out, you brute!" A vicious kick from the gardener, and a yelp, followed by a threatening growl from the wolf-hound, who had left the dead mastiff, and just

then came limping back towards the group around the fallen lady, called forth :

"How dare you do that? Let the dog alone!" from his master. "Down, Valdor! Why, what's the matter with him? Here, stand back!" to the servants; then, raising his stick, the General repeated, in a voice of thunder: "Down, Valdor!"

But, in spite of the repulse, the hound drew near again, and with a low whimpering cry, crept cringingly up to the insensible form lying in their midst, and licked her hands, at which Nathan muttered that "the brute was just craving after the blood."

The animal's behaviour was certainly strange, but he evidently meant no further mischief, and appeared cowed and trembling. Seeing this, the General spoke to him gently, and patted his back, but withdrew his hand hastily, for the wolf-hound's coat was wet with gore and saliva from the recent encounter.

"He's killed Tartar, sir!" said the gardener, throwing the lantern-light on the stiffening form of the other hound.

"Can't make it out," remarked Scroils.

"Here, never mind anything else!" said the General, who was equally puzzled. "Take that poor woman indoors at once. Back, Valdor! Good dog!"

The animal obeyed, wagged his tail, and looked intelligently up into his master's face. The two servants between them now gently lifted the unconscious lady, and carried her into the house, the General preceding them with the lantern, whilst Valdor limped alongside, whining now and again as though in pain.

They laid her on a sofa in the housekeeper's room, and committed her to the care of Harriet, who was wringing her hands at the terrible accident, and going on in a very alarming way, much to the General's irritation. The sight

of so much blood, and the dreadful wounds on the poor sufferer's throat, were enough to shock any woman ; but Harriet quickly recovered herself on a sharp rebuke from her master :

"Get some warm water and bandages," said he. "Bathe her face, and attend to her properly."

"Hadn't I better go for the doctor, sir?" suggested Scroils.

"Doctor ! no ; what can he do ?"

"Them dog-bites, I mean, sir—oughtn't they to be looked to—costicked or something ?"

"Oh, no, nonsense ; there's nothing the matter with the dogs."

"Very good, sir. I expect it was the young 'un that mauled her, and perhaps old Valdor was taking her part, and that's how they fought"—a view of the matter which now occurred to the butler as possible, though at the same time unaccountable ; and so thought his master.

"It's a most extraordinary and unfortunate affair," muttered the General, adding, "but—your wife can do everything that's necessary. Wash all that blood from her face, Harriet ; cleanse the wounds thoroughly, and then apply wet bandages. She'll come to presently ; directly she does, give her some wine and water."

"But excuse me, sir, I really think we ought to have the doctor," ventured Harriet.

"Stuff and nonsense ; there's no need at all for that," rejoined the General, whose objection to calling in medical aid, unless absolutely necessary, arose from the fact that he did not wish the strange mishap to become public, and so cause a possible scandal. With hermit-like instinct he shrank from publicity in any form. But had he known it, there was another and a stronger reason in the background for keeping the matter private. When he did know it

presently, he looked upon his precaution as prophetic and providential. But another discovery immediately nullified such precaution.

Harriet remonstrated, and said she was afraid of the responsibility; but the General paid no heed to her remarks, merely replying that as soon as the lady recovered consciousness they were to let him know, and with that left the room.

As he passed out through the door he found the wolf-hound stretched across the mat as if keeping sentry. He spoke to the animal, and called him by name to follow; but Valdor refused to move, and the General, wondering again at the dog's peculiar behaviour, allowed him to stay where he was, and went back to his own study.

It was with a vague pretence of reading that he settled again to his books, for what had just happened disturbed him considerably; nor had he sat down more than five minutes before he was interrupted by Scroils suddenly appearing at the door.

"Ah! has she come to?"

"No, sir; but we think we've found out who she is. Will you please to step this way?"

Scroils both looked and spoke mysteriously, and his master without further remark followed him back to the housekeeper's room.

As he re-entered, Harriet greeted him quietly with: "It's Miss Mariana, sir. Look. Poor thing! Poor thing!"

"What? Miss who?"

"I should say Mrs. Freith, sir, begging your pardon."

"Mrs. Freith? Impossible—she dares not come here!"

"It is, sir—see!"

Harriet held a candle to the unconscious face, from which she had sponged away the blood. The General drew near, and stood over the sofa, looking down at that

face with a strange expression on his own of mingled surprise and sternness; but no pity, at least no outward sign of pity, for the injured woman was in his austere gaze.

"It *is* Mariana!" he murmured hoarsely. "What does this mean! Why is she here?"

Neither Harriet nor Scroils spoke for a few minutes; the former continuing in silence to dress the lacerated throat as best she could, whilst General Crutwell stood by, staring down at the still white face of the sufferer, with its strong contrast of raven-black eyebrows, lashes, and dishevelled hair.

The features were strikingly like the General's—the same square forehead, straight-cut nose, and thin lips—features cast unmistakably in an identical mould. General Crutwell, glaring with hard, pitiless eyes upon the insensible form lying there, was a father looking upon his daughter—an angry, disappointed father on a wilful, prodigal child.

CHAPTER III.

IN DREAD OF MADNESS

SUDDENLY Harriet interrupted the dead silence, and, turning to her master, said:

"Pray excuse me, sir, but you *must* send for the doctor."

"I shall do nothing of the sort." The General's tone showed him to be far more resolute now in his refusal. "I'm only glad I didn't do so at first. Besides, there's not the least necessity."

"There is, sir, begging your pardon."

Harriet then, after slight demur, drew him apart and whispered something in his ear, which seemed to darken the expression in his face still more.

He paused for a moment, then asked in a low tone :

"Are you sure ?"

"Quite, sir."

"Very well, then ; I suppose there's no help for it. Let Nathan go for him. I'll tell him."

General Crutwell turned his back on the sofa, and was making towards the door, when an exclamation from Harriet stopped him.

"Ah, sir, look ! She's coming round at last—thank heaven, she opens her eyes !"

"I'm glad of it—but I—I have no wish to see her. I refuse to speak to her."

"Oh, sir !"

"And you can tell her so."

"Oh, sir ! sir ! remember she's your daughter," pleaded Harriet, sobbing ; "and maybe she's dying. Oh, poor young lady ! poor young lady !"

"There, there, my good woman, don't be childish." By nature Harriet was rather of the stern than tender order, but this sad sight touched her deeply. "Take every care of her," continued her master. "Dr. Rench shall come to her directly ; but I'll see him first."

The last words the General muttered to himself and left the room again, apparently relentless as ever, for

> Violent things will sooner bear assuaging,
> Their fury being spent by its own shock,
> Than the stern, single, deep, and wordless ire
> Of a strong human heart, and in a sire.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> It is a hard, although a common case,
> To find our children running restive—they

> In whom our brightest days we would retrace,
> Our little selves re-formed in finer clay:
> Just as old age is creeping on apace,
> And clouds come o'er the sunset of our day,
> They kindly leave us.

Ere the hot July sun had risen high in the heavens next morning, Mariana Freith was a mother, a baby-girl having been hurried into the world before her time, not only through the terrible incident of the previous night, but from another and even more terrible cause, as yet to be revealed.

Immediately on the arrival of the doctor during the small hours, General Crutwell had taken him aside and explained how the accident had arisen, adjuring him for certain private reasons, not particularised, to keep his own counsel on the matter. The polite, though slightly sarcastic, reply—that a respectable medical man knew better than to betray the confidences of his profession—was sufficiently reassuring.

Dr. Rench pronounced Mariana to be in a critical state, not from the wounds inflicted by the dog, which he had duly cauterised, but from the violent shock to the system that had brought about the premature birth of the child. The injuries to the throat, he said, were severe but not necessarily dangerous, unless the dog was suffering from rabies. That this was not the case, the General felt quite certain, and was also convinced now that the deceased Tartar was alone responsible for those injuries—that Scroils' surmise was correct as to the young mastiff's attack and the wolf-hound's defence of his whilom mistress.

The report on her precarious condition somewhat softened General Crutwell's heart towards his daughter, who, moreover, appealed to him in a pathetic message, through Harriet, to come and see her and her little child.

He hesitated, and at first declined, saying that it was better she should not be excited in her present state. But soon natural parental feelings prevailed; and he feared that if he did not obey her summons now, he might never again behold her alive.

He entered the partially darkened room, and approached the bed with soft, measured steps. Mariana did not hear him ; her eyes were closed as if in sleep, but ere long they opened at the faint cry of the babe lying at her breast, and then she saw him standing in silence by her side.

"Oh, father, forgive me!"

The low pleading murmur reached his heart. Though hardened by the world, General Crutwell was not all stone. He bent down, and gently pressed his lips to her forehead. Not a word escaped him, but Mariana wanted no more than this. She breathed a deep sigh of relief to know that she had made her peace with him whom she had so justly angered.

It was thus. Two years ago, a young medical man from Liverpool, named Waller Freith, purchased a practice in the neighbourhood, and took up his residence close to Gaunchester-Haugh. In course of time he met Mariana Crutwell, and fell in love with her ; and she, struck by his handsome face, encouraged his addresses. But this she only dared to do clandestinely, being fully aware that her father would be furious at such folly, not to say bad taste, on her part ; for, with all his well-bred-looking face and polished manners, Waller Freith was not a gentleman, nor had he a good reputation with those who knew him—which reputation somehow followed him to ——shire, and handicapped him at starting in his new practice.

General Crutwell, with others, held him under suspicion from the first, owing to the mysterious side-winds which reached them, and Mariana was accustomed to hear him

spoken of in terms of doubt and disparagement. But with that extraordinary infatuation evinced by many another wayward woman who has allowed herself to be prepossessed by a good-looking *mauvais sujet*, and ended in falling in love with him, Waller Freith's questionable antecedents, instead of prejudicing Mariana against him, seemed to have an opposite effect. To be sure, there was the excuse for her that she led a dreary, isolated life at Gaunchester-Haugh, was seldom taken from home, saw little or no society, and certainly never a swain in the county whom she would care to call her lover. And there was yet another excuse in that she inherited all the warm Southern blood of her mother, who was an Italian by birth, and felt that she must love and be loved to live, or pine and die. That same passionate nature in the wife had already wrecked the happiness of General Crutwell, and was destined to do so again in the daughter. But the cases widely differed. The wife had dishonoured her husband, and brought shame and disgrace upon his name. His phlegmatic temperament had been at the bottom of this; Catarina, the hot-blooded Italian girl, fancied herself neglected and uncared for, whereas the General loved her with all his soul, howbeit, by his undemonstrative manner, the light of that love was hidden under a bushel. Hence her impulsive, throbbing heart, chilled by the apparent lack of response, turned for solace to another—to the bosom friend and brother officer of her husband, who outraged the implicit trust placed in him, and snatching at this frail prize, ruthlessly robbed the General of his wife, and fled the country with her.

The daughter had acted in heartless defiance and disobedience of her father; and though well knowing how tenderly he cared for her as his only child, and all he had left to love in the world, and that such an act would go far

to break his heart, she eloped with this adventurer—this medical upstart—and caused a second crushing scandal to fall upon the house. Under any circumstances, General Crutwell would have scouted the idea of her allying herself with a man in such a position; as it was, the act was greatly aggravated. But Mariana paid the penalty of her headstrong folly. In wrecking her father's happiness she had wrecked her own, as she discovered when too late.

"Ah, I have indeed been bitterly, bitterly punished," she moaned out to her aggrieved parent; "my marriage has been too miserable for words, I cannot describe to you my utter wretchedness! Once that man got me into his power he asserted his legal right to torment me, and revenged himself for having, as he put it, been insulted and slighted by you—taunting me, besides, with having ruined him."

"There, there, my dear child, don't talk any more now," the General interrupted kindly and soothingly.

"No, I don't wish to speak more of him; but oh, I did love him so, and *now*—— Ha! what am I saying?" She started up in bed with a sudden wild cry and a terrified look in her dark eyes. "Oh, it all comes back to me! Oh, father, what have I done? what have I done? God have mercy on me, what have I done?" She sank down again on the pillow and gave way to a burst of hysterical weeping.

The General was bewildered and helpless; her intense excitement he attributed to illness and the nervous shock she had sustained. Finding he could not calm her, he summoned Harriet to the room and left it himself, saying he would return by-and-by when she was better.

Days passed and Mariana improved in health, but appeared greatly disturbed in mind; a rooted terror seemed to have seized her—a morbid dread of hydrophobia from

the injuries she had received, for the ragged wound in her neck caused by the dog's teeth had become violently inflamed and refused to heal. This dread she confessed to her father, who did his utmost to talk her out of it, and assured her there was no reason to fear such a consequence since the young dog was perfectly healthy when it bit her.

But there was more on Mariana's mind than this; an awful feeling of approaching madness from another cause. Fierce goblin thoughts haunted the belfry of her brain from morn till night, and threatened to crack within and set in jangling discord the harmonious bells of reason. Yet these thoughts she could not bring herself to confide to her father. She only told him that she had fled from her husband because she found it impossible to live with him another day; then explained what had happened that night of her return, which proved to be as supposed. She said she was stealing timidly up to the house (having walked all the way from Harlingford, which place she reached by the last coach from Liverpool), when the savage mastiff suddenly flew out at her from the shrubberies and dragged her to the ground. With quick presence of mind she remembered her old friend Valdor, and, guessing that he also would be loose about the grounds, called him to her rescue with the result shown.

The secret of her coming back to her father's house was well kept for a time, and only the doctor and the parson of the place, Mr. Kelso—through the functions of their respective professions—knew anything about it. But the fact of her return was destined to impress itself by-and-by upon the mind of the latter in the form of a startling tragedy.

The Rev. Kenneth Kelso was a bigoted Scotchman, of good family, poor as a church mouse, and proud as Lucifer.

But notwithstanding his pride he determined to take no offence at General Crutwell's gloomy reserve and the *noli me tangere* look which he noticed upon his face whenever they met; being cognisant of his recent sorrows, he viewed the old soldier's eccentricities with a charitable eye, as became a minister of the kirk. He had only come into the living within the last two years, and had lost no time in trying to cultivate his mysterious neighbour, but without much success.

The parsonage grounds ran down to the river on the side opposite to General Crutwell's meadows, and a little way below was an ancient Norman bridge connecting the two properties, over which bridge lay the nearest road to the church. The General was a very regular church-goer, and was frequently intercepted by the parson on his way thither, and drawn into conversation whether he would or no. By this means only could Mr. Kelso snatch opportunities for becoming better acquainted with the unsociable and taciturn soldier. But as a preacher he found special favour in the eyes of the General, his extempore sermons being clever, earnest, and full of good argument; very different indeed from the sing-song, soporific rigmaroles of his predecessor, who read his long effusions—compiled, no doubt, from the best authors—in the same dreary monotone from the text to "now unto God."

Maybe Mr. Kelso's superior preaching and the General's appreciation thereof might have bred a friendship between them, had not an untoward circumstance intervened, and put such a contingency for ever out of the question.

That circumstance, instead, made them enemies for life.

CHAPTER IV.

"UNLICENSED TO ETERNITY!"

Oh damn'd despair!—to shun the living light,
And plunge thy guilty soul in endless night!

THE summer was past, and had given place to a wet, chilly autumn, with heavy rains which swelled the river Furion to its banks, and hastened the general decay of Nature. Mariana Freith was still at Gaunchester-Haugh, but kept in the strictest seclusion with her father. Yet long ere this her presence there had leaked out to the inquisitive neighbourhood, as was inevitable.

Mr. Kelso was asked to christen the baby privately at the house; but here he gave them the first taste of his rigid Scotch scruples by a prompt refusal. He said his church was at their service, and that he made it a rule never to baptize infants elsewhere, except in urgent cases, where a child was at the point of death. Although it was not this refusal that led to an open quarrel between them, General Crutwell took great umbrage at it, and the christening of his grand-daughter was postponed *sine die*.

Throughout these three months Mariana's mental condition continued to give her father the greatest anxiety. She was calm, but seemed to have lapsed into an alarming state of hypochondria; and it was the General's conviction, although Mariana had ceased to speak of it, that she still brooded in secret fear of the possible results from those terrible dog-bites. Yet the wounds had long since healed, and she appeared in fair health, showing no signs of any ailment beyond extreme depression of mind; but this was driving her mad—had driven her mad, in fact—an incipient

madness none the less dangerous from its quiet, subdued power.

Late one wild afternoon, towards the end of October, Nathan Slugg was making a feeble attempt to sweep up the leaves on the back lawn—choosing the very worst time, by-the-bye, with an equinoctial gale neutralising his half-hearted efforts—when he caught sight of his master's daughter flitting past through the shrubberies near where he was at work. She was bare-headed, and wore neither cloak nor shawl to protect her from the chilly blast; her raven hair was flying in the wind, and her large black eyes seemed starting from their sockets as she hastened by. The gardener saw the strange, scared look on her face, and, knowing she was "queer i' the head," as he called it, he was prompted to throw down his broom and go after her.

Mariana heard his footsteps, and, stopping in her hurried walk, turned on him suddenly, and asked what he wanted, and why he was following her. Nathan mumbled out some reply, whereat she peremptorily ordered him back to his work; and, like a fool, he obeyed, and allowed her to continue on her way.

About the same time Mr. Kelso was walking in the Rectory grounds beside the river, with his little son Athol, a child of four. The boy had begged his father to take him down to see the flood come tearing past in all the majesty of its strength. He was forbidden by Mr. Kelso to go near the water at any time without his nurse, and never at all during the floods except with him.

The river was now brimming up to its high banks, and rushed by in a turbulent torrent, dead-level with the Gaunchester meadows on the one side and the parsonage garden on the other, the lower part of which was constantly submerged during the winter storms. A regatta of floating

drift-wood came racing madly past on the swirling, discoloured water—large branches of trees and rotten logs—which had much attraction for the boy, who imagined them ships and boats upon the sea. They had been watching this procession of wrecked timber for some time, and it was now growing dusk; so the parson and his son were about to retrace their steps towards the Rectory, when Athol suddenly exclaimed:

"Who's that, papa? Look! who's that coming there?"

"Where, my boy?"

"There, there, by those trees!"

Mr. Kelso glanced in the direction indicated, and saw the slight figure of a woman—a lady in a black dress—walking quickly, almost running, down to the river on the opposite side. She reached the water's edge some seventy yards above where they were standing, and paused for half a minute, as if contemplating the yellow flood flying by at her feet. Mr. Kelso recognised the General's daughter immediately—wild and spectral as she looked in the twilight—and wondered what on earth she was doing there without bonnet or cloak this boisterous evening. She was, apparently, as mad and eccentric as her father. He had hardly time to think these thoughts ere a piercing cry came down on the wind, and, to his horrified astonishment, he beheld her throw up her arms to heaven and plunge deliberately into the seething current. There was no doubt about it—the act was deliberate and evidently premeditated. The parson was no coward, but only a moderate swimmer, and as the dark form came drifting swiftly towards them, now sinking out of sight, now rising to the surface, he asked himself whether, as a husband and a father, he had a right to risk his own life by jumping into the angry river to the rescue of that poor, crazed suicide. But now as she swept rapidly past, and he caught a glimpse of her white

face, the hunted look, the agonised eyes, humanity prevailed—the man beat the philosopher, and in a trice his hat and coat were off.

"Oh, don't, papa—don't!" cried the frightened child, seeing directly what his father meant to do; "don't, you'll be drownded!" and he clung to his knees in alarm.

"Leave go, boy—leave go!" exclaimed Mr. Kelso. "Run up to the house—quick!—call William!—tell him to bring a pole—a rope—quick! quick!" Whereat little Athol scampered off in obedience.

Mr. Kelso had also to run fast to get in advance of the drowning woman, before he should take a header in after her. Her clothes, and the swiftness of the stream, had kept her afloat so far; but he knew she would sink very soon for the last time. As he ran along the bank, shouting at the top of his voice for help, a large dog came bounding over the meadows towards the river—old Valdor, the faithful wolf-hound, who had spied his mistress from afar, and was flying to join her. Directly he got to the bank he seemed to know by instinct what had happened, and turning sharply, darted down stream till he caught sight of her in the water. Then almost at the same instant of time parson and hound leapt into the racing flood together, and swam after Mariana's sinking form. But just as they reached it she disappeared. Mr. Kelso dived immediately to recover her, but they were swept down some distance, and he had to repeat the dive three times in the muddy water before he succeeded in clutching hold of her long, loose hair as she drifted in front of him. At last, much exhausted himself, he managed to bring her to the surface, whereupon the wolf-dog, who was still swimming close at hand, seized her dress in his powerful jaws, and the two thus held her up whilst the swollen river, here at its most rapid point, whirled them along with tremendous velocity.

The clergyman now realised for the first time the presence of his canine companion in the rescue, and spoke a word of encouragement to him. He needed all his aid, for their danger at this moment was great. The thick, impetuous water seemed to be flying with them at racehorse speed, and before he could get out of the middle of the current to make for shore, he saw that they were drawing fast towards the Norman bridge, and in imminent peril of being sucked beneath its now hidden arches. But luckily other help was at hand. William had heard his master's frantic shouts before the child had time to reach the house, and guessed that somebody had fallen into the river. Snatching up the first thing to hand, which happened to be a long hay-rake, he ran down the garden, and came up with the trio in the water at a bend of the stream, where he was just able to reach them with the handle as they went sweeping by. Mr. Kelso seized it, and he and the drowning woman were drawn to the bank.

But meanwhile Valdor had disappeared. From some unaccountable cause the wolf-dog had relinquished his hold, and was now being swept helplessly down to the bridge, beneath which he vanished ere many seconds into the dark depths. The parson witnessed this with a pang of regret that his brave comrade should so perish; but his attention was quickly turned from the fate of the hound to that of its mistress—for her appearance gave sufficient cause for alarm, and it seemed as if the gallant attempt to save her life had been in vain. An apprehension only too well founded; for though she was still breathing faintly when they got her to the bank, this last spark of vitality soon died out, and all their efforts at resuscitation by artificial means proved unavailing. It was evident her face must have been under water nearly all the time of her immersion.

Mariana Freith was a dead woman, and had died by her own act. Of this Mr. Kelso was fully convinced.

They carried her body up to the Rectory, and thence the parson, having changed his wet clothes, took it on in his own carriage to the General's house. He had only entered that house twice before on formal visits, and now on this painful occasion entered it, as it turned out, for the last time during the owner's life. Before removing the corpse of the unhappy woman from the conveyance, he rang the bell, was admitted to the General's presence, and then broke the shocking news to him as gently as he could.

General Crutwell was staggered, but in his heart felt, from secret reasons, that this had taken place only as he had dreaded.

Mr. Kelso touched modestly on his own courageous efforts to save the poor girl, and the bereaved father thanked him in a voice tremulous with emotion, but did not ask how she had fallen into the river—he guessed too truly—and the clergyman spared him at that mournful moment by refraining from any precise explanation of what he had witnessed.

CHAPTER V.

A NAMELESS GRAVE

Is she to be buried in Christian burial that wilfully seeks her own salvation?

. . . . . .
We should profane the service of the dead
To sing a requiem, and such rest to her
As to peace-parted souls.
. . . . . .
. . . I tell thee, churlish priest,
A minist'ring angel shall my sister be,
When thou liest howling.

SCARCELY an hour ago General Crutwell had held a distressing interview with his daughter, and in that interview had learnt the true cause of her mental agony.

She had suddenly burst upon him in his private room, with eyes distended, white quivering lips, and the dews of terror on her brow. She strove to speak, but the words died away in a gasping sigh, and she sank speechless and trembling on the nearest chair. Her father was greatly alarmed; the thought immediately crossed his mind that she was seized with the first symptoms of the awful malady which constant brooding in silent dread had brought upon her. And she had come to tell him this at last! But no—it was no poison of the blood, but of the heart—the conscience—that thus tortured her. What she had to tell was of yet more fearful import than even that he apprehended.

Then at length speech came to her, and she cried in thrilling tones:

"Oh, father, save me! Hide me from him! He is here—here in this house at this moment!"

"Who, child? What do you mean—who?"

"My husband! my husband!"

"Your husband—here in my house!"

General Crutwell rose instantly from his chair, and moved towards the door.

"But no—stay, father! It cannot be. It is some horrible vision that haunts me. It cannot be he, for he is dead—dead!"

"Dead! What are you saying, Mariana? What wild frenzy is this?"

"It is no frenzy, father; he *is* dead, and I have this minute seen his spirit. It passed before me as I sat alone in my room; I beheld it as distinctly as I see you. I see it now! It freezes up my marrow, and forces the confession from my lips! Oh, father, it is indeed so—he is *dead*." Her voice sank into a terrified whisper. "He died before my eyes and by this hand! *Yes, I killed him!* He raised the devil in me—I was exasperated, maddened by his coarse brutality—I bore with it for long in suffering and patience—but in an evil hour he drove me beside myself, when I seized a knife—unluckily at hand upon the table—and stabbed him to the heart!"

General Crutwell recoiled from her in dismay; he, in his turn, was struck dumb with horror. Then, after an awful pause, he asked in a strange, suppressed voice:

"Mariana, is this true—or some freak of your distorted brain?"

"It is true—God help me, only too true!"

"God help you, indeed—you, my daughter, a murderess! Ah, it needed not this to crown our shame and sorrow!"

The old soldier fell back into his chair and buried his face in his hand, stunned by this terrible blow.

Another solemn pause ensued, and then a piteous cry broke from the cowering woman by his side.

"Oh, father, have mercy on me—do not turn from me at this awful moment. Ah, if you but knew all I have suffered through my own wicked folly and disobedience, you would pity me—indeed, indeed you would."

The General rose again slowly, but he seemed bent and shrunken now from his lofty stature, and shook in every limb.

"My poor unhappy girl," he murmured in a husky voice, "it is not for me to judge you: I may pity you, but the law has none. It will search you out, it will drag you in shame to the bar of justice, and may Heaven protect you, for I cannot."

"No, no, they have not found me yet, and now they never shall," she cried impetuously. "I have seen his spirit to-day, and it has warned me. I shrank from confessing to you before, but I will spare you this disgrace; they shall never place me in the felon's dock—they shall never lock me in a murderer's cell! Never! never!—do not fear it!"

She was hurrying from the room and had reached the door when he called to her:

"Stay, Mariana! What would you do? Where can you go?"

"God only knows—not I! Abroad—to another country—to another world!" The last words were muttered inaudibly, and before he could stop her she had rushed from the study, and, as he thought, upstairs to her own room; hence he left her alone to grow calmer by herself. Now, albeit the General apprehended danger from her present demented state, he did not realise how near that danger was, and little thought that he had looked upon her alive for the last time, and that within an hour she would be brought into his presence a corpse.

Eleven days and nights had elapsed since Mariana

Freith had sought that "undiscovered country from whose bourne no traveller returns," had flown to other ills she knew not of, and still her body lay uncommitted to the grave. For a week past the remains had been soldered up in their leaden shell and screwed down in the oaken coffin, but the funeral was postponed. An unlooked-for and painful obstacle had arisen to the carrying out of the last sad ceremony.

The Rev. Kenneth Kelso refused to bury her in consecrated ground!

General Crutwell had intimated to him by note the day on which he wished the funeral to take place, and received the following reply:

"CHEPSLOW RECTORY,
"*October 29th*, 1839

"MY DEAR GENERAL CRUTWELL,

"Feeling as I do the deepest commiseration for you in your great affliction, you will, I am sure, believe me when I say that it gives me all the more pain to answer your letter as my duty compels. I wish, indeed, I could have spared you that answer, and earnestly hoped that I might not be called upon to give it. In such a dark hour a man with all Christian sympathy at his heart would fain regard the feelings of his brother, but the tenets of my sacred calling are imperative, and I can acknowledge but one law for the rich as for the poor. Ere you read thus far you will anticipate what I would say—what I have no option but to say.

"I witnessed your poor daughter's death, as you are aware, and when I plunged into the flooded river to snatch her, if possible, from that death—the death eternal—alas, too obviously self-sought and self-inflicted—I prayed to God to aid me in rescuing her body from the grave, her soul from everlasting perdition. But it was not to be; she

had flown in the face of Providence, and Providence rejected me as its instrument of salvation. Believe me, dear General Crutwell, I am grieved beyond measure to be obliged to frame the sentence, but as it was God's will that she should perish by her own rash deed, so as God's minister is it my duty to refuse her burial in His sacred ground.

"I will not pain you further by entering into the legal *technique* of the case, but must add that no coroner's inquest could have sat with the record of my unwilling evidence before it, and vouchsafed me that authority which by the Church ordinances I am debarred. Pray forgive my powerlessness to waive the ecclesiastic decree, nor cherish unjust resentment for my compulsory refusal to your request.

"I am, my dear General Crutwell,

"Yours in all sincerity and fellow-feeling,

"KENNETH MCL. KELSO."

The General's blood boiled when he read this letter. He looked upon it, plausibly couched though it was, as a deliberate insult, and despised the man for his heartless sophistry.

On furious impulse he hastened over to the parsonage, to answer that letter in person. He was shown into Mr. Kelso's sanctum; the room, no doubt, where all those beautiful sermons were thought out before delivery. Bah! the hypocritical effusions of a cold-blooded, bigoted churl! So General Crutwell now deemed them; and he looked around the shelves with a bitter sneer at the array of theological works and God-like books, which had taught their owner (if he read them) no better Christianity than this.

Mr. Kelso entered the room to greet his visitor with a full apprehension of unpleasantness arising from his letter, yet scarcely prepared for violence. For the first few

minutes of the interview, however, the incensed father suppressed his rage by a superlative effort. He loftily declined the proffered chair, and both remained standing. The old soldier's tall form towered above the squat, broad figure of the Scotchman, like a mountain peak dominating a rounded hill—a volcanic peak, indeed, smouldering with latent fires, and threatening every moment to burst out into fierce eruption. And burst it did, when Mr. Kelso had replied to the preternaturally calm question as to whether he would recall that letter, or whether it was to be considered final—a courteous, deferential reply enough, but acting as a spark to a magazine. The explosion was instantaneous. Then followed a stormy scene—stormy, at least, on the one side; but the parson's placid exterior remained comparatively unruffled under the tempest of wrath which swooped down upon his head.

"And you mean to tell me this," cried the General, his voice crescendoing with each indignant word; "you mean to tell me that you presume to refuse my poor girl a place in our own vault in the church!"

"General Crutwell, pray ye pardon me, but I have no choice in the matter. The case is most distressing, to me as to you, but, being one of *felo de se* beyond any doot——"

"By what right do you say so? What evidence have you to prove such a thing?"

"My own eyes, unfortunately. I witnessed the act. I stood within a few yards of her, and saw her deliberately throw herself into the raging river. Would I had not done so; but, since it was ordained that I should, I ask ye, can I, as Christ's meenister, reconcile my conscience with Him and give her Christian burial?"

"By heaven, man, may you reconcile that conscience with God at your last hour, when you remember this

refusal!" The General's voice was hoarse with passion as he hurled the malediction at him. "May your cruel insult to the dead recoil upon your head, and make you curse, as I do, your mean, unchristian creed! Did I but choose to drag my grief along the roads and demand inquiry, I could obtain a verdict which would over-rule your narrow-minded scruples, and force you to perform that sacred rite, as is your duty and her due. For the rest, mark me! if I have to open the vault and carry her to it myself, I say she *shall* be buried there; and let me see the man who will dare to oppose it!"

"I shall do so, General Crutwell, be assured," replied Mr. Kelso, roused at last by such words. "Angry abuse will no daunt me from doing what I know is right, however painful it may be; and I, as rector of this parish, shall both oppose and prevent ye."

"By the living God, sir, stop me if you can!" cried the infuriated father. "Stop me at your peril!"

The look and action were so threatening, that the parson fully expected an assault there and then; nor would his cloth have protected him for another minute, had not the General, feeling that he could trust himself no longer in that presence, dashed out of the house with the fierce words of defiance on his lips. He hurried impetuously through the parsonage gates, a vacant, unseeing look in his eyes, rage and vengeance wrestling with the sorrow at his heart. But, as he reached the old Norman bridge, the sight of the river recalled him.

He paused for a minute, gazing at the very spot where his daughter had been taken from the water, dead. Then the reaction set in, and he continued on his way to his own house with slow, measured step. On reaching it he retired to his study, and, throwing himself into an arm-chair, wept bitterly.

It was years since the floodgates of his heart had been thus opened; even his daughter's self-destruction had failed to open them, though his grief was none the less poignant—all the harder to bear the dull ache in his overburdened breast which now at last found vent in tears.

On calm reflection, he felt how utterly powerless he was; that his threat to the pharisaical parson, as he considered him, was an empty one—mere words. The terrible circumstances of the case bound him hand and foot. He knew that any public action on his part would but court exposure and further disgrace. The unhappy girl had destroyed herself in the insanity of remorse, and had perished with her husband's blood upon her head. She had been tempted to rush uncalled into the presence of her Creator—had died in mortal sin, without shrift, unction, or absolution. No, she must be consigned to the grave quietly, secretly, and the double tragedy of her married life buried with her; that tragedy must be put out of sight as soon as possible, lest the world should seize upon it and make it history.

With this new resolution in his mind, General Crutwell ordered a private vault—a miniature mausoleum—to be built in a remote spot amid the wooded walks of Gaunchester-Haugh; hence the delay of the burial for a few days. There he laid her to rest, and read the service over her himself, as he had done for many a comrade in the field; his butler, gardener, and housekeeper constituting the funeral *cortège*.

There was something strange and weird, yet singularly impressive, about the ceremony, performed as it was (by the General's wish) at twilight, for twilight in these umbrageous depths meant almost midnight darkness. In broad day, and on the sunniest day, that portion of the grounds, with the moss-grown paths vanishing in the

tenebrous shade of ancient evergreens, was mysterious and eerie ; far more so, then, at gloaming.

The lonely site of the vault was hemmed in by patriarchal box-trees and junipers, which completely hid it from view even when you were close upon it.

The two men-servants led the way slowly from the house, carrying the coffin between them by handles at each end, as though it had been a child's ; the General followed it immediately in rear, with gray head bared, prayer-book in hand, and not a spot of white visible in his attire, the black military surtout fastened close up to the throat, and the high, old-fashioned stock taking the place of cravat and collar ; behind him came Harriet Scroils, and in her hand a large basket of white roses and lilies to be strewn upon the body at the last moment.

As they neared the grave the General opened the book, and by the flare of two torches held aloft by the coffin-bearers read out in clear, sonorous tones :

"I am the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord ; he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live ; and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die."

They reached the new-made vault, halted, and laid the oaken coffin down reverentially beside it. Then came a long pause—a monastic silence. The evening was perfectly still, as befitted the solemn scene ; not a breath of air stirred the flames of the torches, which flickered on the funereal foliage around, and rendered all beyond their rays black as Erebus.

For a few minutes the General appeared overpowered, and unable to proceed with the service, whilst large tears rolled down his deep-lined cheeks and fell upon the coffin at his feet. Presently, with startling suddenness, the harsh note of the night-jar broke upon the deathlike

quiet, and seemed to rouse the mourner from his tearful reverie, when he continued reading, but now in a low, quavering voice, and evidently labouring to the end.

And near by the vault they buried the faithful Valdor, whose body was found, when the river fell, wedged in between some roots and the brickwork of one of the arches of the bridge.

Over the grave of the wolf-hound was placed a small tablet, with his name and a brief line to his memory; on the tombstone of Mariana Freith simply the initial M., and the date of her decease.

CHAPTER VI.

DISMISSED WITH IGNOMINY

After the dreadful occurrence of his daughter's violent death, General Crutwell found the renewed solitude of his home insupportable: the walls of the house seemed haunted with strange echoes and ghostly images. He could bear it no longer, and for the first time for several years left Gaunchester-Haugh, and went abroad to pass the winter at some out-of-the-way place in the South of France.

His infant grand-daughter he committed, meanwhile, to the care of his maiden sister, Anna Crutwell, who was the only near relative he possessed, and one of the very few people with whom he now corresponded. She lived by herself on the dreary fens of Lincolnshire, in much the same sort of seclusion as her brother, and seemed glad to take temporary charge of the child at his suggestion; but beyond the fact of its mother's sudden death, knew nothing of the sad story connected with the parents.

Spring was merging into summer when General Crutwell came back to his home, and, shortly after he did so, an unexpected event greeted him.

It was his daily custom of an afternoon to pay a visit to his daughter's tomb, in its sequestered corner, where he would spend hours in silent self-commune, his thoughts in unison with the gloom of those sylvan solitudes.

On one of these occasions he was returning sooner than usual from his pilgrimage, warned by the darkness, which seemed to have descended with tropical suddenness, and made him fancy that night had overtaken him while lost in meditation. But the abrupt obscurity arose from another cause. For the last hour, complaining murmurs in the murky heavens had told of distant strife among the elements. Dense, lowering clouds had gathered swiftly overhead, and turned the perpetual dusk of the yew walks into nocturnal shade, when each mystic nook became a cavern black as the interior of a wolf's mouth, the deep brown shadows of the trees dark as pitch. Presently the lurid clouds burst into lines of liquid flame, as though Satan were hurling coals of fire across the firmament, and the earth vibrated with an instantaneous roar louder than a volley of giant guns, which rolled away in a dropping, bumping sound, like a heavy body falling from stair to stair. It was the first thunderstorm of the summer; in fierceness and grandeur not likely to be outdone by any that should come after. Now and again a large space of sky opened with a flash of blinding splendour, seeming to reveal beyond the very glory of heaven, and at each blaze the crest of the yew woods stood black to the dazzle. Then down came the rain in a broad, hissing sheet, deluging the ground and minimising the danger of the electric fluid.

The General quickened from his usual leisurely pace to regain the house. All at once he stopped, and started

back with an exclamation of alarm. Immediately before him, in the pathway, stood the figure of a man, who seemed to have sprung up from the ground, or fallen from the lightning-clouds like a thunder-bolt, so sudden was the apparition. He had no belief in the supernatural, but that this *was* some apparition he could scarcely doubt, when the next flash revealed to him the face of his murdered son-in-law.

The incident, the place, the time, the abrupt revelation of that spectral-looking figure in such a gloomy haunt, amid the glare of lightning, were enough to daunt the stoutest heart. General Crutwell, naturally fearless though he was, was thoroughly taken aback for the moment.

"Good God! What are you?" he gasped.

"You know me, I think, sir! I am your daughter's husband, and I have come for her."

The sound of the human voice was a relief, but the words were not so reassuring.

"In heaven's name, what do you mean? Who—who are you?" stammered the General.

"I have said who I am—Waller Freith, your son-in-law!"

"You! Waller Freith? The man's dead!"

"Ah, you think so? Murdered by his wife, eh? She told you that, then? But he wasn't! She meant it, and very nearly did it, too; but he pulled through, and here he stands."

"Psha! Don't tell me that—I don't believe you! This is some attempt at imposition. If you are not off my grounds in five minutes, I'll send for the police. Let me pass."

General Crutwell had recovered his nerve, and now moved forward again.

"Stop a moment, sir," replied the man, putting out his

hand to detain him. "What I say is true enough. Can you doubt my identity? There!" Just then another flash of lightning lit up his features. "You know my face. I am no impostor and no beggar. All I have come to beg is my wife—to claim her."

"I—I don't understand it, but—follow me," said the General, perplexed and wavering. "Come up to the house out of this rain, and I will hear what you have to say." Thereat he walked on, and the other obeyed without further remark.

On going indoors, the General led the way to his private room, having first changed his wet coat in the hall. He allowed his visitor to remain in his, without deigning to offer to have it dried for him. Nor did he even invite him to be seated when they entered the study, and himself took up a standing position on the hearthrug, with his back to the mantel-piece, renewing the interview with a laconic "Now, sir!"

The room was as dark as the walks, but at intervals a brilliant flash illumined it, and then followed a detonating clap of thunder that shook the old mansion and made the windows rattle again, while the rain still came down in torrents.

"Well, it only remains for me to repeat what I have said, General Crutwell," resumed the man. "I *am* your son-in-law—Waller Freith in the flesh, and no other—recovered by a miracle, and after a long illness, from a dangerous stab dealt by my wife in a fit of frenzy. She fled from me and left me for dead, and, I have no doubt, thought she was a murderess; but, thank God, a good constitution spared her that. I have been for months in hospital, but resolved when I could to go in search of her. For that purpose I came down here to-day. There seemed to be no one to answer the door, so I ventured to look for you in the grounds."

While he was speaking, General Crutwell lighted two candles on the mantel-piece, and now closely scrutinised his face. The examination seemed to convince him that the man's story was true as to his identity.

He appeared very young—not more than three-and-twenty. His face was now pale, and he looked wretchedly ill—his slight figure, of medium height, much pulled down; but in health that face, hairless as a boy's, was of remarkable beauty, as much for its intellectual cast as perfection of feature. His short curly hair clustered around a well-shaped head, like that of a Greek god; his broad forehead, with prominent perceptives, and straight-cut nose, were outlined in the same Grecian mould. But his eyes spoilt him; they were not true, and seemed to change colour with his moods—were now soft and liquid, now hard and lowering; and with their variable expression the mouth altered correspondingly, so that a handsome, winning face became transformed in a moment into one malevolent-looking and forbidding.

"And what do you want of me?" General Crutwell demanded curtly. "Your wife—my daughter, whom you stole from my doors? You are too late; she is lost to you—for ever!"

"Lost to me for ever! Where is she? You don't mean she is——"

"Dead!"

"Dead! No, no; don't put me off with that." Waller Freith in turn doubted the General's word. "You want to keep her from me, but you shall not."

"I tell you she is dead," said General Crutwell, in a stern, solemn voice.

"And I tell you I won't be put off with that," cried the other impetuously. "You are deceiving me! She is here—she is hiding from me, and I mean to take her back."

"That will do, sir; I am not in the habit of lying," retorted the old soldier haughtily. "There is the door!"

"General Crutwell, look here! Do you take me for a fool, to be treated in this way? Give me back my wife, or tell me where she is. If she is not here now, she *has* been to you, or you couldn't have known about——"

"Once more, man, I repeat, your wife is dead; and were she alive, she would never return to you. True, she has been here, and told me what had happened—of her misery and your brutish conduct, the cause of all."

"Ah, well, there are two sides to that question, General," returned Freith, in an offhand tone. "*You* know something about her temper, I think. But I needn't try to defend myself to her father. All I will say is, she ruined me. I threw up a promising practice here for her sake, and found I had made a bad bargain."

"I am heartily glad to hear it. It was a just reward for your treachery."

"Treachery! What treachery? There was none on my part—I loved her——"

The General gave a snort of contempt.

"Loved her! Don't talk to me of your animal feelings. I say you lured my child from her home by some infernal sorcery, or she would never have stooped to a low——"

"Steady, sir! Take care how you insult me. I don't wish to forget myself, but I will not brook an insult from you or any man living. Listen here! Your daughter cast her lot in with mine of her own free will. We knew your consent was out of the question, and had no alternative but to run away together. That we did so you have only to thank yourself."

"Confound your insolence!" cried the General. "You dare to aggravate the case by telling me this! I will hear no more from you. Go out of my house this instant!"

"Not before you have answered me these questions—

If Mariana *is* dead, where did she die? and where is she buried?"

"I——I decline to tell you. Go, sir!"

"Then I decline to believe you. It's a quibble. You mean she is dead to *me*. But, by God, I'll find her out—I'll make her come back to her husband, and the devil himself shan't prevent me!"

There was a fiendish look of determination in the man's face as he spoke, which his hearer duly noted.

"Do your worst; I am only thankful she is beyond your power. And now, Mr. Freith, oblige me by leaving this house." The General spoke more quietly as he put his hand to the bell.

"Stop! don't ring yet. Grant me a few more minutes. I won't fight against you any longer. I'll give in." Waller Freith abruptly changed his tone and manner to suit his purpose. "If you pledge me your word as a gentleman that poor Mariana is dead, I'll believe you."

"I have already given you that word, sir——"

"Then I am indeed shocked to know that it is really so."

"Don't ask me anything further, for I refuse to answer."

"Very well, then, I will not. As to how and where she died, and where she is buried, you have some reason for keeping from me, I suppose. What that inscrutable reason may be I don't understand. But let it pass. I come to another subject. General Crutwell, I am a ruined man!"

The statement was impressive, and to a certain extent true enough, but the General received it with a discouraging air.

"I have lost all for her sake," continued the young man—"my practice here, my practice in Liverpool. Every patient has slipped from my hands whilst a patient myself. I have been laid on a bed of sickness—near proving my

death-bed—put to torture and expense, and all through her. I appeal to you, then, as the father of my dead wife, to have some sympathy for me——"

"Ah, that is the other subject?" interrupted General Crutwell, with a sneer. "I thought you said you were no beggar!"

"Nor am I; but, under the painful circumstances, surely I have some claim on you as—as your son-in-law."

"Under the painful circumstances I decline to see that, Mr. Freith." The General's tone became still harsher and more unyielding. "Who asked you to become my son-in-law, and what have you brought to me by the alliance? I consider it a gross effrontery to urge such a point."

"To you it may seem so, sir; but I am desperate, and staring starvation knows no over-refinement of scruple. You are rich, and can save me if you will. I sink my pride, and ask this in memory of Mariana."

"That sad memory alone would be enough to ensure my refusal. I only marvel at your want of judgment in imagining otherwise. I do refuse—unhesitatingly, emphatically."

"For God's sake, don't! Don't send me from here to-night in despair and degradation. I beseech you, don't do so, General Crutwell, or——" He paused.

"Or what?"

Waller Freith was silent.

"Um—you have changed your key considerably since the commencement of this interview," resumed the General, after waiting for a few seconds for him to go on. "It seems now that your object in coming here to-day was not to ask for your wife, but for money."

"I came for her and her alone, and it is only because I have lost her that I appeal to you for help and pity. I hoped earnestly to have seen her—for her to have been

restored to me—that when she beheld me a wreck like this she would have regretted her passionate act, and that we should have become reconciled under your roof and with your approval."

"Never with my approval; nor would you have found reconciliation with her. But both are now beyond discussion. Death, in lieu of the law, has stepped in between you, and you are separated for ever. As for myself, you are nothing to me, and I decline to have anything to do with you."

Waller Freith bit his lip and clenched his fists with tearing, impotent rage, but did not speak for a few moments. Suddenly he burst out:

"General Crutwell, you are a cruel, flint-hearted man! I verily believe you had no more love for your daughter, nor sorrow for her death, than you have pity for me."

"If I had not it would be little indeed, Mr. Freith. I have nothing further to say. Our interview is at an end," and with that he rang the bell.

"Then I have humbled myself in vain! You refuse me a helping hand after all I have suffered on your daughter's account? I wish to understand that thoroughly, so I ask you once more——"

"Spare yourself further humiliation. You have my answer."

"Very good, then, I accept that answer—for the present. Perhaps by-and-by you may change in your disposition towards me." The General smiled coldly. "At any rate I will wait. Meanwhile pray let me apologise for my importunity. I ought to have known better."

"I think you ought," was the old officer's reply.

The butler now appeared; from his promptness in answering the bell it appeared as if he had been hovering somewhere near.

"Scroils, show this gentleman out," said his master pompously.

"Good evening to you, General Crutwell." Waller Freith extended his hand in ordinary politeness, but the General drew back and bowed stiffly. At this affront before the servant a demoniacal look leapt up into the young man's white face, a look enhanced at that moment by a vivid flash of lightning. He paused at the door, then bowing in return, said :

"I have had great pleasure in making your acquaintance to-day, sir, and I look forward, I assure you, with even greater, to renewing it on some future occasion."

There was not much in the words, but the angry eyes glistening through the transparent smile conveyed a covered threat which the unbending father-in-law could not fail to note, but received with supreme scorn.

"Since it still rains somewhat," continued Freith sarcastically, "perhaps you will permit me to take refuge outside in your porch until——?"

"Certainly not, Mr. Freith ; oblige me by taking a seat in the hall till the storm is over."

"Sir, I am infinitely indebted to you——"

"Not at all, you are most welcome to the accommodation."

Waller Freith then left the room, followed by Scroils, but naturally did not avail himself of the shelter so insultingly offered. He went straight across to the front door, and there paused for a moment with his hand upon the handle, when Scroils stepped forward, saying : "Allow me, sir," and was about to open it for him, but it stuck, as it often did, from the damp, and he fumbled and tugged for a few seconds before he succeeded. Meantime with quick, stealthy action, Freith, unobserved, had written something on the woodwork at one side of the door.

A quivering dazzle and simultaneous crash in the heavily-loaded sky drove the butler back from the open doorway, the rain now descending like a water-spout.

But without further hesitation Freith passed out into the pitiless storm, and quickly disappeared in the semi-darkness.

Scroils looked after him for a few moments, and shook his head gravely; then turning to his master, who came out into the hall as the front door closed, said quietly:

'I wish you'd asked that young man to stay dinner, sir. Let me call him back."

"Call him back! what do you mean?"

Again Scroils shook his head.

"Excuse me, sir, but I know who he is, and I'm afraid he won't forget this. I watched his face while he was speakin' to you, and if ever I saw the devil it was there! I'm sorry you sent him away so, sir. *I* shall never feel safe in the place now, especially without them dogs!"

"Tush, man! don't talk like an old woman!" exclaimed the General impatiently. "Go back to your pantry and mind your own business."

Scroils obeyed without a word. He was too well disciplined to argue with his austere master.

General Crutwell himself, as already hinted, did not know the meaning of the word fear. His Victoria Cross, with bar, won by acts of daring in the field, fully testified to that. He had ever been accustomed to hold danger of any kind in contempt. Certainly, then, he was the last person to be intimidated by the masked threat of an angry, disappointed man, or to be daunted by the anticipation of any imaginary or possible evil that might arise from this scornful repulse of his unwelcome son-in-law, who had dared to invade the sanctity of Gaunchester-Haugh.

THE STORY

AS TOLD BY MATTIE FREITH

CHAPTER I.

FORBIDDEN SWEETS

This bud of love, by summer's ripening breath,
May prove a beauteous flower when next we meet.

LOOK around at the quiet old place now, not a whit altered from what it was in the days I am going to tell about, and can scarcely realise that the strange and terrible events which took place within its walls, or within the boundary of its premises, are actual facts, and no frightful nightmare. I often doubt my own memory when I think of it all, and yet have good reason not to do so.

Old houses, like dead men, tell no tales. They stand, till demolished by time, in grim and silent record of the past, together with their fellow witnesses, the Methuselah trees, who sigh, and moan, and howl around as though in perpetual lamentation of all they have seen and heard. But the dark histories are brought to light and duly chronicled—sometimes by a faithful pen, sometimes by the pen of hyperbole. I propose to tell my story with the first.

My early life at Gaunchester-Haugh was divided into three short periods—five months of infancy, five years of childhood, and less than one of girlhood, at the age of nineteen. With the first period, of course, I have nothing to do ; the second I will just skip over lightly, and, like a good story-teller, come promptly to the third, for in that period lies the pith of what I have to relate. I say my childhood at the old home I will skim over quickly, that is, will only follow it

As a traveller follows a streamlet's course through the valley :
Far from its margin at times, and seeing the gleam of its water
Here and there, in some open space, and at intervals only ;
Then drawing nearer its banks, through sylvan glooms that conceal it,
Though he behold it not, he can hear its continuous murmurs ;
Happy, at length, if he find the spot where it reaches an outlet.

Anything for a change ! And no one ever welcomed that anything more than I did when I left Aunt Anna's great ugly house on the Lincolnshire fens, and went to live with my grandfather, General Crutwell, at Gaunchester-Haugh. Not that the one house was any livelier than the other, but the latter was a novelty. With the romantic grounds I was simply enchanted. Such glorious woods and grand old trees were in delicious contrast to the dreary, timberless flats I had been accustomed to.

I, Mattie Freith, christened Martha (thank goodness for the abbreviation !—a name singularly prophetic, for I was destined to be troubled about many things), was just twelve years old when sent back to my birthplace, and at that age full of youthful appreciation for the new glories of nature which here burst upon me.

I remember, when I took my first walk round the grounds with my grandfather, I thought what delightful fun I should have climbing this or that feasible tree and looking for birds' nests, or roaming about alone in the

mysterious walks, and fancying myself in Wonderland. My great-aunt had been very kind to me in her way, but had kept me terribly under the apron-strings of my nurse; and being of a roving, I'm afraid rather tom-boyish disposition, I yearned for freedom. Not that there was much inducement to rove about the flat, uninteresting fen country, but here, oh, how different! Now I longed more than ever for that freedom, only wishing I might get it; and I did. For some time after I returned on his hands, the General considerately let me do much as I liked, and I was bothered neither with a governess nor any too obtrusive attendant. I was now beyond a nurse. Child companions I had never known, so did not miss them; I was very independent, and revelled in my own society. My only playmate was a queer old tom-cat called Cæsar; but he was never allowed in the house, for the General, like "Dog Tray," was a mortal foe to the cat tribe, and averse to pets of any kind, which I considered horrid of him.

There was a strong affinity between Cæsar and me. We used to scramble up trees and walls together in friendly rivalry, and I believe I was almost as active as the cat—so the servants said. Traces of me were to be found everywhere—little bits of frill or muslin at various elevations. These disagreeable old Nathan, the gardener, was wont to collect spitefully and take to my grandfather, when I got a good scolding for spoiling my clothes, and the promise of a birching if I did it again. But, of course, old people cannot be expected to enter into youthful spirits, or appreciate monkey-like habits, and I forgave them. Good gracious! how tremendously ancient they all seemed, that quartette of the grandfather, Scroils, Harriet, and Nathan—as old as the house and trees themselves. The only creature there about my own age was Cæsar, and he was pretty antiquated for a cat.

But I was soon destined to meet somebody more interesting, and of a more kindred spirit than even my feline friend.

It was a silent, peaceful afternoon in autumn, about a month after my arrival at Gaunchester-Haugh—silent, save for the cawing of grotesque old rooks in the elms, and the chattering of starlings among the gables. The ill-kept grounds were bathed in a faint yellow light, the sad sunshine of the declining year. The gardens bore the seal of gradual decay, and on the lawns and walks amber leaves fluttered down slowly, incessantly. The time of flowers was fast waning, nearly over, but the orchards were rich with golden pippins and rosy-faced apples. The russet woods beside the river stood ripe to be stript, yet still full of leaf. The pastures were mellowed far and wide, but much rain had fallen since the last moon, and the grass was heavy with moisture ; the lawn dank and sodden, with layers of wet, rotting leaves lying in neglected places. The wand of an early frost had changed the green bracken into gold, and out in the misty meadows, beyond the yellowing shrubberies, the blackberries swarmed upon the prickly labyrinths of bramble.

Thither I hie me, with a basket on my arm, to feast on the wild fruit, and, squirrel-like, to lay in a hoard for the morrow, in case of a rainy day.

My shoes and stockings are soaking wet before I have half crossed the swishy meadows to get to the best blackberry brakes ; but I am regardless as a young gipsy of such a trifle as this. I wander along for some time picking and eating, and smearing my face and hands, as well as staining my frock, with the dark purple juice, until I find myself close to the river. It has risen a great deal from the recent rain ; the lively, fast-running water attracts me, so I leave the blackberries to go and watch it. Hitherto I have only

seen it crawling along at tortoise-pace. Now it is wide awake, and seems to be making up for lost time in its hurry to get down to the sea, and I have to walk smartly along the bank to keep up with it. Presently I come opposite to the parsonage grounds. At the bottom of the garden is a boy also watching the river. I stop and look across at him; he looks at me, and I can't help thinking what a particularly handsome face he has, for I am already quite old enough to admire beauty in the opposite sex. He seems to be about fourteen, and wears a short jacket and large turned-down collar, like the traditional school-boy; and that's what he is—young Kelso home from Eton, as I soon discover.

We stand staring at each other in the rudest manner for at least a minute, and neither speaks. Suddenly a bright thought seems to strike him. He smiles, picks up a large piece of wood close by, and waving it at me across the river, roars out:

"I say, look here! You throw in that bit at your feet there, and I'll race you with this down to the bridge."

I accept the challenge on the spot.

"All right, I'm Cambridge!" I cry in reply.

"All right," says he, "I'm Oxford. Now then, when I give the word three—one, two, *three!*" and splosh go the two pieces of wood into the muddy stream, his getting rather the start.

"Oxford wins! I'll back Oxford!" he shouts, as we trot alongside, watching our respective bits of timber, and quite imagining them for the occasion to be eight-oared outriggers.

"No, no, Cambridge!" I scream at the top of my voice, as my boat pulls up and passes his.

"Not a bit of it—look there! Bravo, Oxford!"

On we go dancing, and prancing, and shouting down the

banks in friendly familiarity as though we had been brought up from the cradle together, and great is our excitement, as first one, then the other boat gets in front. Now Cambridge is caught in a swirling eddy and hangs back, while Oxford glides by triumphantly; then Oxford gets stopped by some obstruction, and Cambridge snatches the lead again, and so on, up to the ancient ivy-covered bridge, on nearing which the two race nose and nose at a great pace, and it looks like being a dead heat, but just at the last Cambridge puts on a spurt and palpably shoots the centre arch first by a few inches, when I scream out in triumph:

"Hurrah, Cambridge! well rowed, Cambridge! I told you so."

"Not a bit of it; Oxford!" yells the bare-faced youth. "Oxford won by a foot!"

"Oh, you horrid story!" I retort excitedly, regardless of the etiquette due to a stranger.

"I tell you it did," he contradicts, with equal disregard.

"I tell you it didn't," and we both run on to the bridge and look over the other side of it, to see our two boats go bobbing and drifting down the river together until a bend shuts them out from view.

Then he turns to me and says, more politely: "How do you do?" and shakes hands, urging afterwards, with a twinkle in his blue eyes, "but now, really and truly, you know, I think Oxford did win."

"Oh, I *don't* think so, indeed," I reply, emulating his more civilised tone.

"Very well, then; it shall be as you wish—I won't contradict a lady."

Come, what a nice boy!

"But you *will* own Cambridge won fairly, *won't* you?"

I press coaxingly, not at all satisfied to be allowed the victory only on sufferance, and sticking to my point like the woman with the scissors.

"Yes, yes, of course—I was only humbugging."

Here he looks at me critically, at my tousled hair, and mouth decorated with blackberry juice.

"I say, excuse me, who are you?" he asks, rather abruptly.

"I'm Mattie Freith."

"Mattie what?"

"Freith."

"Oh!—and where do you live?"

"There," pointing at our house.

"What, with the General?"

"Yes; he's my grandfather."

"I've never seen you before. When did you come?"

"Only a few weeks ago. And now, who are you?"

"Mr. Kelso's son—the clergyman there," tossing his thumb over at the parsonage.

"What's *your* name?"

"Athol." ("What a pretty name!" I think.) "I came home for the Michaelmas holidays, but stayed on because I haven't been well."

"Oh, I'm sorry for that."

"What—that I stayed?" smiling.

"That you've been ill, of course; and when do you go back?"

"The week after next."

"Oh, what a pity!"

"Why?"

"Because I hoped we might have some fun together."

"Well, so we will till then, and I shall be home again at Christmas. You'll be here still, won't you?"

"Oh yes, I suppose so; I'm living here now."

"That's jolly. We'll have some more races. What have you got there?"

"Blackberries. Have some."

"Thanks." He helps himself, and we cement our acquaintance by gobbling together. I am pleased to see that his mouth is soon in much the same state as mine.

"Hulloa! there's my guv'nor," he observes presently, catching sight of somebody in the distance.

"Your what?"

"My paternal—my dad, you know."

"You mean your papa, I suppose. Why don't you call him so?"

"Oh no, *we* never do that; it's girlish. Have you got a father?"

"No, I don't think so."

"How do you mean?"

"None that I ever heard of."

"A mother?"

"No; she died when I was a baby."

"Ah, I see; so you've come to live with your grandfather?"

"Yes; but I was born here."

"Indeed!"

"Athol! Athol!" calls the voice of the "guv'nor."

"There! I must be off. Good-bye."

"Good-bye."

"I say, be here to-morrow."

"What time?"

"Three."

"Very well;" and we part.

I was delighted at our meeting, and went home in high glee at the prospect of having a jolly boy like that to play with.

But my glee was doomed to an immediate damper.

As I was running back to the house, I met the General taking his evening stroll.

"Hulloa! where have you been, Mattie?" he asked.

"Blackberrying, grandpa." My hands, face, and frock proved that, as well as my basket.

"Where?"

"Down by the river."

"I told you not to go near that river alone."

"Oh, but, please, I haven't been alone."

"Whom have you been with?"

"I met somebody there—such a nice boy——"

"A boy! what boy?"

"Mr. Kelso's son, Athol."

"Young Kelso!" My grandfather's face grew black as midnight. He caught hold of my arm tightly with his one hand, and in a terrible voice said: "Now listen to me, Mattie. If ever you dare to speak to that boy again, on any pretence whatever, I shall flog you soundly. Do you understand that?"

"Ye—es, grandp—pa." And I began to blubber, wondering what harm I had done.

"Or to his father, or any one belonging to that house. Do you hear me?"

"Ye—es, grandp—pa—bo—oh!" The bony fingers hurt my small arm, and his fierce, ogre-like eyes frightened me, so I roared out lustily, and tried to wriggle away.

"Now, don't cry, child." Here he gave me a rough shake, and thereby pumped up more tears and howls. "There's nothing to cry about. Be a good girl, and do as I tell you. There, run along in to your tea."

And off I went, glad to get out of his vulture claw.

I told Harriet at tea-time all about Athol, and what the General had said, and wanted to know what it meant.

But she was not explicit, and merely remarked that I must do as I was bid, or I should "get the birch."

The old housekeeper was a hard-featured, bony-looking woman, with light-coloured, expressionless eyes, and a grimness of countenance in which she seemed to take after her master. She was not the sort of person to win a child's affection, and certainly never tried to win mine. I was more afraid than fond of her.

Now, although my grandfather gave me freedom enough, he seemed bent upon ruling me with a rod of iron, or rather of twigs, for I lived with that essentially Saxon weapon of chastisement, the birch, perpetually hanging over my head like the Damoclean sword.

With all deference to Solomon's maxim, I venture to think this *fortiter in re* system was a mistake with a girl of my disposition, for though of rather a contumacious nature, I am certain the *suaviter in modo* would have answered better in the end.

It was not till years afterwards that I understood my grandfather's misguided motive for his severity towards me. He was cruel to be kind, no doubt, in his own thinking; but a sensitive child fails to appreciate that nice distinction between cruel kindness and downright cruelty; the coupling together of such contradictory terms is beyond its understanding.

I had no intention of wilfully disobeying his commands on this present occasion, and only wandered towards the bridge next day just to explain matters to Athol Kelso, lest he should think me rude—to tell him that, very much to my regret, I had been prohibited from ever speaking to him again. When I reached the bridge, no one was on or near it; the stable clock had struck three long ago, therefore I was late; he might have come to the spot and gone away again. Still, the chances were, he would return

presently. I waited about for a considerable time in the hope of his doing so, for I was anxious to let him know the situation, but at last had to give it up, as I could see nothing of him, and went home not a little disappointed.

Three or four days afterwards, our second meeting came about quite by chance. I was out nutting in the woods below the bridge, on our side of the river, but away from it, when I heard some one just on ahead whistling "The Girl I left behind me," dreadfully out of tune. I knew at once it was a boy's whistle, and only hoped it might be Athol's. It was. Now, this was purely accidental, and no fault of mine. Of course he would speak to me first; then I couldn't help answering, and my conscience would be clear.

I come up with him. He is nutting too, but only cracking and eating them as he goes along, like a monkey; whereas I am gathering mine in a basket for the General's dessert. The finest cobs grow in these woods—which woods, by the way, belong to my grandfather, so Master Athol is trespassing. I shall tell my young friend of that, and show him my importance. He seems too busy to notice me, so I pretend not to see *him*, and go on picking. Then, as he won't look my way, I begin humming an air (more in tune than his whistling, I flatter myself) to draw his attention. He turns and faces me; but, to my surprise, instead of coming forward, only grins, without speaking, and dives into the bushes out of sight.

This is too much for my equanimity; what does he mean by it? But of course he's only playing. However, I'll pull him up for trespassing, so call out in a shrill treble:

"Hi! I saw you, you know! You've no business here—these are *our* woods. My grandfather will give it to you."

"Dare say he will if he catches me," replies a nut-munching voice in the depths beyond, "but I don't mean to let him. I'm off."

"No, no, stop—I want to speak to you."

"*I* don't want to speak to *you*—that's to say, I mustn't."

"What do you mean? Come out of there and explain."

"All right, wait a second—let me pick these first." Then with a rustle and scramble he reappears. Such a dear, bonny boy he looks! I feel quite mutinous when I think of my grandfather's injunctions.

"Now, who said you weren't to speak to me?" I inquire imperiously.

"My guv'nor; he saw us the other day on the bridge and asked who you were, so I told him."

"And my grandfather forbid *me* to have anything to say to *you*—isn't it funny? What do they mean?"

"Well, you see, the guv'nor and the General are bad friends—quarrelled years ago, before you were born."

"What about?"

"That I can't tell you exactly, and nobody at our place has anything to do with anybody at yours. That's how it was I didn't know you'd come. They keep things precious dark at Gaunchester-Haugh. It's a good joke, isn't it, their wanting to stop us, and here we are talking together like one o'clock!"

"I couldn't help it."

"More could I, but I didn't speak to you first."

"Now, that's mean—just like a man."

"I'm not a man—yet, but——"

"Well, a boy; it's all the same. You take after Adam; *he* blamed Eve, and you want to put it on me."

"Oh no, I don't; I'll say it's my fault if we're caught;

but I like talking to you, and I don't see why we shouldn't, especially if we meet by accident——"

"Yes, there's not much harm then, surely."

"And we can often meet by accident if you choose."

"Very well, I'll try," I answer naïvely. "And, by-the-bye, I went down to the bridge that next day, but——"

"Did you? I'm so sorry—I couldn't come. Then you're not much afraid of your grand-dad, I suppose?"

"Oh yes, I am, dreadfully."

"Why, does he whip you?"

"He hasn't yet, but he's always saying he will."

"What a beast!"

"No, he isn't!" I retort, bridling up with a consanguineous feeling highly creditable to me, I think, under the circumstances—"he's my grandfather."

"I don't care, he would be a beast to whip a dear little girl like you." Athol speaks with a very chivalrous air. "I only wish I was bigger, I'd stick up for you—such a pretty little girl, too. Yes, you *are* pretty, Mattie," looking at me critically with one of his eyes half closed; "I suppose you know that?"

"I didn't," I reply; "but it's nice of you to tell me so, no one else ever did."

"I say it because I think it. Will you give me a kiss, Mattie?"

How could I refuse after such a compliment? I turn my face up to his—a small brown face with very black eyes and red lips, I know that much—and he gives me a hearty kiss on those lips, and that is how it began; from that kiss, duly returned, sprang the course of our true love which was destined to run anything but smooth. Even now a great rock was just ahead, for as we came out of the wood together in true lover-like fashion, with an arm around each other, we tumbled literally into those of my grand-

father; at least we might have done so, but that he had only one, and this fact, perhaps, favoured us.

With a scream I dodged, threw down my basket, and ran off in one direction while Athol bolted in another. The General shook his fist in impotent rage at Athol, and then gave chase to me. But a young girl with two legs can run faster than an old man with one arm (meaning no disrespect to his misfortune), and I soon put a safe distance between myself and my furious grandfather, whom I heard growling in my wake like a pursuing lion. I flew for my very life, and hid in the yew walks, choosing a good hiding-place, as I fancied, behind something that looked like one of the tombs in the churchyard. It was nearly covered with ivy and thickly surrounded by trees, and there I felt tolerably secure till dusk, when I meant to steal into the house and go to bed without anybody knowing. But after a time I began to get tired of my cramped position, and thought I might safely move about a little to stretch my legs, so ventured forth from my lair.

I had no sooner done so than I heard footsteps approaching; I scurried back and re-ensconced myself as quickly as possible, and was only just in time, for a moment afterwards my grandfather appeared through the dense phalanx of trees. Shaking like a jelly all the while, I watched him from a convenient peephole. Was he looking for me? How clever of him to think of coming here; he'd make a good player at hide-and-seek. I only wished he *would* play at it sometimes, but not in this sort of way.

He stood staring at the ivy-mantled tomb (I wondered if it *could* be a tomb, or what?) for several minutes with such a strange look in his face and eyes, very different from his usual expression—softer, and not so like that of an eagle. What did he see? Why was he looking at it so? Then I noticed something glistening on his cheek: a spot

of rain, perhaps—it couldn't be a tear; I smiled at the thought. Suddenly his glance changed its direction, and fell upon the exact spot where I lay. I knew I should be discovered in a moment; those keen, flashing eyes could see through a wall, I verily believed, and, of course, would penetrate my leafy retreat. Ah, yes, he saw me, sure enough; but it was a protruding piece of my print frock that had betrayed me. I knew that, when too late to draw it back. He took a step nearer, and peered through the evergreens.

"Mattie, is that you?"

No answer, except from my thumping heart, which was going like a threshing-machine.

"Come here, child."

It was not the least use skulking any longer; I thought I had better come out and get it over. With quaking bosom I rose, and crept from behind the tomb. Oh, how tall and weird and grisly he looked in the ghostly gloom, like some terrible giant in my story-books. I expected to be annihilated on the spot. But, no! To my surprise he *didn't* pounce on me, as usual, like a hawk on a sparrow; instead, he took hold of my arm quite gently—for *him*. All the same, I began to whimper.

"So that's where you've been hiding, is it? You naughty, disobedient girl!" he exclaimed, in a tone which did not sound so very angry after all. "Ah, you tremble! No wonder you're frightened. You know what you deserve; but now—stop crying, and I won't flog you this time. I'll forgive you this once, if you promise never to disobey me again. Do you hear?"

"Ye—es, I p—prom—promise," I replied, with convulsive jerks from the sobs which shook my tender frame.

Then, to my further and utter amazement, his great gaunt figure came down to my level, and he kissed me—

actually kissed me. I didn't understand it—I couldn't understand it a bit, but I know I felt really penitent at the time, and my heart was very full. I still sobbed on, but no longer from fear; the kind tone and action had sprung a different well in my young breast.

"There, there! wipe your eyes, Mattie, and come indoors with me;" and taking my little hand in his, he led me away from my dusky retreat, and kept me so by his side till we regained the house.

After this, I determined to be good and not see Athol Kelso any more if I could help it; a resolution all the harder to keep in this budding time of my child-love, for I was a poor, lonely little creature, with nothing else to care for except the cat; and this perhaps made me rather precocious in my early attachment to Athol. But I did keep my resolution, and he went back to Eton without our meeting again. I fretted about him a good deal, and remembering what he had said, sought consolation during my fits of the "blues" in my looking-glass. For had he not told me I was pretty? and surely he ought to know; doubtless he saw plenty of other girls to judge by, whereas *I* only saw *him*. I tried to think he was right, and that on this account he would not altogether forget me. Nor did he.

CHAPTER II.

MY HIGHLAND LADDIE

Oh, ye're a' the warl' to me, lassie!
Ye're a' the warl' to me;
This heart shall cease to beat for aye,
Ere it proves false to thee!

Love is like a lamb, and love is like a lion!

Four years have passed; I am now "sweet seventeen"—instead of a little child, a "big girl," or, as my grandfather is pleased to call me, a "responsible young woman"—in mind and feelings more matured, and my heart filled with the great treasure which has grown with it. I begin to look upon *la grande passion* now with a womanly understanding. I have learnt to conjugate the verb "to love" both in and out of the school-room, taking my lesson with Miss Pridden, my governess, in the one case, and with Athol Kelso, whenever I could, in the other. In short, our "bud of love" *has* ripened into a "beauteous flower;" through many frosts and many obstacles it has come out in triumph a full-blown blossom. To explain this process of development, let me go back for a moment to the time when I made that promise to my grandfather not to meet Athol any more.

During the subsequent Christmas holidays I never saw him at all, except at church, and then only peeped at him slyly from under my broad-brimmed hat. This was not at his father's place of worship—the General would not allow even his servants to go there—but at a little picturesque Norman church about a mile off, which we attended regularly, and where Athol knew he would have a chance of seeing me.

Again at Easter he came home, and we never met, nor was it till late in the following midsummer holidays that we came together once more. But as this was quite by accident, I did not consider I had broken my promise. My grandfather thought otherwise, however, when, as bad luck would have it, he came upon us unawares, and caught me in flagrant delict. It was useless to protest and make excuses, he would believe nothing. It was enough that he saw Athol sneaking away over the bridge, and me standing near it with a face like a damask rose, and trying to look innocent.

In the hurricane of his wrath he took me up to the house, and then and there carried out his long-standing threat, and birched me ignominiously. Yes, actually birched me, Mattie Freith, a girl then more than thirteen years of age, as he would have flogged a little school-boy! It was a gross indignity, and I couldn't get over it. I went straightway to Athol the moment I had the chance, crying with rage, and still smarting from the wales on my poor little person. I knew where to find him, as he said he was going fishing by-and-by. With many a sob I told him of my cruel humiliation, and though the announcement was scarcely unexpected, it roused Athol, who declared it was all his fault, to a high pitch of fury. He wanted to go up to the house forthwith, and kick the General's shins till he apologised, and I had much ado to calm him, and prevent him from committing some desperate act to avenge me.

After my grandfather had so degraded me by this corporal punishment, I was utterly reckless, and met my boy-lover as often as I possibly could, during his holidays, not in open defiance—there would have been less charm in that—but secretly still, which gave special zest to the affair. This sort of thing, however, was not allowed to go on for long. Although my grandfather never caught us again, he

knew I was acting in down-right rebellion against him, and took his steps accordingly. At the following Christmas he procured a governess, to whom he gave the strictest injunctions regarding me, and at the same time communicated with Mr. Kelso on his son's disgraceful behaviour in inciting me to mutiny, which last measure effectually put a stop to our meetings for a time.

But Athol Kelso remained staunch to me, and I to him, in face of everything and everybody. Our constancy was the more creditable, since we had very few opportunities of seeing each other during the latter part of those four years, years which had also wrought a great alteration in the appearance of my boy, who, now nineteen, had developed into a strapping young man. I was intensely proud of him. He had long since left Eton and passed into the Royal Military College at Sandhurst. Of late the Rectory had known him only for short, flying visits during vacation time, his father preferring him (entirely because of me, I believe) to keep away as much as possible.

But on those few occasions when he did come home, I managed, by careful strategy, to keep up the clandestine link between us, and to elude the vigilance of Miss Pridden, who was either not very sharp, or else very good-natured. I suspected the latter, and found, ere long, I was right—that she knew of our sly meetings, and, pitying me, had blinked at them. And that brings me to the *dénouement* of this period of my life at Gaunchester-Haugh, to an incident with which I will close the brief record of those days, the honeyed time of my childhood's stolen romance, very sweet to me, in spite of birch-rods, bread and water, and, latterly, long French lessons, as penance for my sins.

Athol had passed his examination for the army, and had been gazetted to the 93rd Highlanders, at that time serving in Bengal. Oh, how I quaked when I knew it!

The Indian Mutiny had just broken out, and was rapidly swelling into a flood of bloodshed and horrors. I dreaded my lover going to the far East in the very teeth of such perils—as it seemed to me, into the very jaws of death.

Before sailing for India, he came home for five days, to bid his parents good-bye and get together his things. There was no time, therefore, to be lost in waiting for a chance meeting with me. I received intimation of his presence on the second day after his arrival, through the medium of a confidential parish school-girl, who managed to slip a note into my hand while I was out walking with Miss Pridden.

I lingered behind to pick a flower and read furtively :

"Here I am, back again, dear little Mat, but only on a flying visit, so be at the old spot at four to-morrow, if you wish to see a real Highland warrior in the flesh, and say farewell to

"Your faithful lover,
"Tol."

I loitered till my governess was out of sight round a corner, and then scribbled on the back of the note—I had no other paper, but, luckily, a pencil :

"Darling boy, of course I will be there, and the old gentleman himself shan't stop me. (Don't be shocked ; I only meant my grandfather.) Pray come in uniform ; I am dying to see you in it. Don't fail, for it may be my only chance.

"Your unhappy sweetheart,
"Mat."

This precious scrawl I gave to the girl with anxious

injunctions, and she departed on her way the richer by a munificent twopence, while I hurried forward and rejoined Miss Pridden with as innocent a look on my flushed face as I could muster.

Unlike our sex in general, whether in love or out of it, I was very punctual next day at our place of tryst (the skeleton of an old riven elm, standing in the heart of the nut-woods); more than punctual—I was before my time. But I held with Rosalind that "he" (or she—it applied to both, in my opinion) "that will divide a minute into a thousand parts, and break but a part of the thousandth part of a minute in the affairs of love, it may be said of him that Cupid hath clapped him o' the shoulder, but I warrant him heart-whole."

Now my old friend the stable clock had struck four at least five minutes ago—and as yet no Athol! However, he presently appeared, and *not* in uniform. What a shame! I did not mind his breaking that five minutes, but I did think he would have done as I asked him. Stay, though, what is that large bundle he carries? Perhaps that will explain.

He at once kissed away the suspicion of a pout on my red lips, and plunged *in medias res*, *i.e.*, the bundle, which he proceeded to open.

"I've brought it, pet, to please *you*," said he, with just a pardonable little swagger in his tone; "but I couldn't go strutting about here in my war-paint, you know, or the gude folks would think I'd gone mad. I was determined *you* should see it, though, so here you are," taking the things out proudly, one by one, much to my curiosity and delight, which rose with each article. "There! there's the far-famed bonnet—one of the very identicals that came over the Border. I shan't want it in the gorgeous tropics, by the way; but my outfitter seemed to think otherwise—out-

fitters generally do, I believe. They are rather particular about your having everything complete at the paternal expense; afterwards, you may become wiser if you choose. Then there's the philibeg, the sporran, and all the rest of the 'pomp and circumstance.' Ain't they stunning? Something like a uniform—eh? I shall look splendid, shan't I?"

Words could not express my admiration.

"Oh, pray put them on!" I cried feverishly.

"Shall I? All right, so I will." I think he rather favoured the suggestion. "You just wait a bit, and I'll go over to the other side of the wood and whip into them in no time."

"Oh, can you? Do, there's a dear boy."

"Very good; but mind, it's no conceit, you know, Mat; it's only just to oblige you."

"Of course, *I* understand; don't be long."

"I won't be two jiffies" (however long that might mean); and gathering up the things, he runs off with them to his *al fresco* dressing-room, in a remote corner among the trees.

He is certainly marvellously quick in donning that brand-new and rather complicated attire—though I doubt whether he did it *inside* the "two jiffies" named—and presently, with a shrill "whoop," bounds forth again into view.

Oh, he does look perfectly splendid; and with that great ostrich-feather head-piece, as tall as the General! I dance round and round him, clapping my hands for joy. During the last year he has filled out wonderfully, and his figure, though still slight, seems almost burly in the kilt; he has a beautiful pair of legs, too, as I now notice—I can't help looking at them. Ay, he *is* a bonny lad—a young Apollo—the very beau-ideal of a fine Highland soldier.

After executing my war-dance I drop into a circular walk, and inspect him closely; this takes some little time. All at once I bethink me of the other side of the picture—the blank canvas which will soon be turned on me—and then recollect that he is only provided with this handsome dress to go and get killed in it.

"Oh, Athol, take it off! take it off! I hate the sight of it all. Oh, I *can't* bear it. Athol! Athol darling! what *shall* I do without you?" And I fall a-crying on his breast. He tries to soothe me, but I hear how his voice shakes, and take comfort in the thought that he feels it as much as I do. We remain in a sorrowful embrace for some time, exchanging murmured vows of imperishable love and constancy; and though weighted with woe at the imminent parting, thus heart to heart we are happy for those sweet, full moments. Had there been any one near to witness our romantic meeting, I think they might have pronounced us a rather picturesque couple—I, standing there with my large straw hat, and thick coal-black hair hanging down my back in wavy masses, and my soldier-boy's arms around me; he, in his historic garb, with his lofty crest, stooping to meet my sad up-turned face.

Ha! what's that? A faint rustling among the bushes brings us down abruptly from heaven to earth. Some one *is* near—approaching—who? Perhaps my grandfather, prowling about after his errant grandchild! But no, I catch a glimpse of a petticoat through the trees, so it can't be the General, unless he has suddenly taken it into his head to disguise himself as a woman to catch me; and, with all his eccentricity, that's not quite likely. No; instead of his grim face, I am presently relieved to see that of my mild and tolerant *gouvernante* peeping at us between the boughs.

"Oh, it's all right, dear," I whisper, much relieved, in

Athol's ear; "it's only Miss Pridden. I'll go and talk her over, and introduce you."

And this I do far more easily than I expected, and she appears so much impressed with my handsome Highland laddie that she makes but the feeblest attempt to reprimand me for disobedience of orders, and enters into friendly conversation with him. But all at once she appears to be seized with a panic at her dereliction of duty, and begs us to bid each other farewell as quickly as possible, and get it over, at the same time considerately withdrawing a short distance to look for some particular fern. The further law she grants us is very short, all too short; but this is not to be our good-bye, and as Miss Pridden again draws near, we give each other *au revoir* instead, with a long, long kiss and a whispered assignation for the morrow. Alas, *l'homme propose*——!

On my way back to the house I thank my kind-hearted governess for her consideration, upon which she confesses her secret sympathy for us, and only hopes it may not get her into trouble with the General.

Prophetic words! No sooner did we enter the grounds than I saw my grandfather coming to meet us, with much condescension, as I imagined for the moment; but I was quickly undeceived. He did not even wait to take Miss Pridden apart and speak to her privately, but with a low ironical bow, said:

"Madam, allow me to express my appreciation of the very honourable manner in which you have observed the trust I reposed in you regarding my grand-daughter, and—to request that you will find it convenient to leave Gaunchester-Haugh to-morrow as early as possible."

Not another word did he vouchsafe her; nor did she, poor woman, venture any remonstrance, her usually pale cheek owning fierily to the betrayal of his confidence

Now I could not stand by and see her suffer for my disobedience, so exclaimed impulsively :

"Oh, grandpa, indeed, indeed it wasn't Miss Pridden's fault. I—I—" He cut me short in a voice of thunder :

"Hold your tongue, miss ! and go to your room this instant !"

I burst out crying, not on my own account, but on hers, and, obeying him, went upstairs and threw myself on my bed in a passion of tears.

No one came near me that evening. Tealess and supperless I went to bed, and, amid the tempest of my sobs, did not hear the jarring lock of the door as it was turned upon me.

Poor Miss Pridden ! I never saw her again until long afterwards ; sure enough, she went the following morning. She had a married sister living near Kellingsby, with whom she went to stay for a time, and from there wrote me a touching little letter, begging me not to fret on her account, and only hoping that happier days might be in store for me, and that we should meet again. We did, under circumstances far more painful to us both than those attending our parting.

Now, who had seen and told ? Who had spied upon us in the wood, and then gone up in hot haste to betray us to the General ? Who but that horrid old Nathan Slugg ? And Nathan it was, as I subsequently learnt.

I lay awake half the night crying at what had happened—to think that I had lost my poor governess her place—and, worn out at last, slept heavily towards morning. I was roused from my sleep by hearing the grating lock turn in my door ; and directly I heard it I understood what it meant. I thought so. Harriet came in with a sphinx-like face and silent as a ghost, to deposit beside my bed a cup of cold water and a plate of dry bread. I knew now

that I was doomed to two or three days' imprisonment at least; and at the same instant the dreadful thought darted across me that Athol would be gone in that time, and I should have no chance of seeing him even once more to say good-bye. Such a thought maddened me. To-day, at four o'clock, we were to have met again at the old place. He would be there, and finding me not, would know that something had happened to prevent me from keeping my tryst. What would he do? Go again next day, and again be disappointed. And then? Oh, surely he wouldn't give it up, and leave without seeing me! No; "what love can do, that dares love attempt," and I felt quite certain he would make an effort to get at me somehow. For that I waited expectantly, impatiently.

Two days dragged their slow length along, and I remained still in durance vile, my poor little body and soul only kept together by that starvation bread and water. Oh, what a hard, cruel man my grandfather was! I began to hate him in my heart, and vowed to do all sorts of desperate deeds when I should get free. Free! And why should I not get free? Was I a helpless fowl to be cooped up here at the top of an old barn, and my lover not six hundred yards away, yet separated from me as effectually as though we were ten thousand miles apart, which indeed we soon should be? I felt distracted and desperate.

The third day had drawn to its weary close; the long dusk of the summer evening was deepening into night, and still no sign of Athol. Ah! was it possible that he had gone without making that effort? My heart sank at the idea—I could not believe it. Well, as he did not come to me, I would find some way of going to him. I beat about at my window like a wild bird against the bars of its cage. I was determined to get to him, if I had to leap out into the garden.

I could understand now the daring of prisoners who so often in the annals of martyrs and criminals have risked life and limb for liberty.

My window is rather high, over twenty feet from the ground; but the ivy! Surely I can climb down by the ivy! Whether I can or no, I mean to try. It is not a matter of choice or calculation—it is do or die.

I open the window, and clamber out upon the ledge. Just as I do so, I fancy I hear somebody moving in the shrubbery below. I pause to listen. It is nearly dark, for the moon has not yet risen. Ha! yes—a cautious whisper, a smothered call reaches me. It is Athol! Nothing can stop me now. I answer back in a low tone:

"I hear you—look out below! I'm coming! Catch me if I fall!"

"No, no, don't, for heaven's sake, Mattie! You'll kill yourself!" he cries in alarm, quite loud enough to betray us if any one is near. "Stop, darling, I'll climb up to you."

But this will be bad for him if caught, so I decide quickly.

"No, no, you mustn't! *I* can manage it!" And without more ado I catch hold of the ivy, and commence my descent; but, alas! it fails to support my weight, and I scream out involuntarily as I feel myself falling, falling through the leaves. Then comes a crash—a flashing of stars—and oblivion!

I am stunned, but not for long. I have fallen into my lover's arms, my head striking against his shoulder; and now he is bending over me, in pain himself from the blow. With loving murmurs he tries to woo me back to life, and I hear him groaning in distress.

"Oh, Mattie, Mattie, my brave little Mattie! Are you hurt?—are you hurt?"

I open my eyes, and whisper faintly :

"No, not much, dear, only shaken—but it's worth it! I would sooner have died than missed seeing you."

No bones are broken, I am relieved to find ; and, except for a grazed arm and a bump on my forehead, I am none the worse.

"You plucky little pet!" Athol exclaims enthusiastically, snatching me back to his heart. "Now I know how you love me! But you might have killed yourself."

"Not with you to catch me. You did, didn't you?"

"Yes ; but think of the force from that height."

"Oh, are *you* hurt, dear?" I ask anxiously.

"Nothing to speak of ; and, as you say, it's worth it. So, somebody told?"

"Yes ; that old wretch Nathan, I believe ; and poor Miss Pridden's been sent away."

"What an awful chouse! Ha! look out, Mattie! Quick—stoop down!"

The gleam of a lantern warns us. It comes quickly round a corner of the house, and in our direction. We crouch together in the bushes, close as two Indian spies. Then my heart stands still, as I hear the General's voice challenging like a sentry :

"Who is there?"

A silence.

"Who is there? Answer, or I fire!"

"Oh, heavens!" I whisper.

"Hsh!" from Athol.

Another silence—an immensely long one.

Every moment I expect to see the flash of the pistol, and perhaps feel the bullet, for that my grandfather is in earnest I make no doubt, and I know he always keeps a great horse-pistol ready to hand in his study.

The suspense is fearful. There are two figures ; somebody is with him carrying the lantern ; he is in front, as we can tell from his height. They advance four or five paces towards us.

"Who is there, I say?" more loudly and sternly. "Do you hear? Answer, or take the consequences."

"Oh, Athol!" I cry, with bated, trembling breath.

"Hsh! be quiet."

"He *will* shoot."

"He daren't!"

"Very well, then, if you *won't* answer——" came the last challenge.

I can bear it no longer. I jump up screaming :

"No, no, don't, grandpa, it's only *me!* Run, Athol."

"Blowed if I do—I'll see you through it."

He has also risen and stands beside me, a champion at bay. I feel safer, but dreadfully frightened for him. The others draw near, and Scroils flashes the lantern on his face.

"So it's you, is it, you young blackguard?" exclaims the General, closing towards him threateningly.

Athol never flinches an inch.

"Yes, it *is* me," he answers dauntlessly, also rather regardless of grammar, "but no blackguard, if you please."

"Then what do you call yourself, pray, to come prowling about a gentleman's house like a thief in the night? Be off with you this instant. We will hear what the magistrates have to say to this. As for *you*, you minx!——" here my grandfather turns upon me with gloating wrath and seizes me roughly by the arm, when, to my horror, Athol interposes and drags me back.

"General Crutwell, you shall not touch her," he says quietly, but with desperate firmness. My grandfather is astounded. "I say you shall not touch her. You, an old

soldier, and strike a helpless girl! *I* am a soldier now, and, by G—d, I'll stop you!"

The rest of that terrible scene is a confused memory. I see the General raise his bludgeon as if to strike, and Athol, instead of avoiding the threatened blow, spring forward from my side. Then I hear a loud smack, a sickening thud, and behold my grandfather lying on his back on the grass, with Scroils kneeling beside him, and my young lover standing staring at him, dazed and scared at what he has done.

CHAPTER III.

HOW I WAS GREETED ON MY RETURN FROM SCHOOL

It is a year ago since Athol Kelso felled the General to the ground in my defence. Now my doughty champion is in India fighting the Sepoy rebels under a withering sun, while I am at school at a French convent finishing my education, and fretting my heart out for his safety.

The sequel to that eventful evening at Gaunchester-Haugh I may give in a few words. Athol, it appears, confessed to his father what had happened directly he got home, and next morning came a letter of apology to the General from the young ensign.

To this the old officer replied in a temperate tone which filled me with agreeable surprise and great thankfulness when I knew of it, for until the crisis was over I had a horrible dread of what would be done to Athol for his assault and trespass, and fully anticipated that my grandfather would visit on his youthful head some terrible reprisal. But instead of that he behaved in a most moderate

and magnanimous manner, and showed up in colours more in keeping with the honourable order he had won on the field of battle. Verily, my grandfather was an anomaly, a strange compound character. Before Athol left England he sent me a copy of both his letter and the reply (which I kept as curiosities), with a note from himself saying that he thought the General must be a much better fellow than we gave him credit for being, in fact, τετραγωνὸς ἄνευ ψογοῦ, or in other words, as he kindly explained, a regular brick! In Athol's apology he expressed his sincere regret for his violent act, and wished to add that in the darkness, and heat of the moment, he quite forgot that the General was a cripple with only one arm, or he would never have struck him even in self-defence. But I found further excuse for the apologist in my own mind when I recollected that my grandfather wielded a huge cudgel, which surely made up for the deficiency of an arm.

The General's letter was to the effect that he accepted Athol's apology, and decided to overlook his monstrous behaviour, since it was evident he had been carried away by an excess of chivalric feeling; but he might think himself exceedingly lucky that he (the General) was one who could appreciate pluck and spirit in a youth, although displayed in an outrageously wrong cause. The General went on to say, he did not wish to do anything that might injure a young soldier at the outset of his military career, but trusted that this forbearance would act as a warning against, rather than as an encouragement to, his letting his valour in the future get the better of his discretion towards his superiors in the service.

As for myself, he told me quietly on the morning after the *fracas* that I was quite beyond him, and that he thought we had better part for the present, adding, with amiable sarcasm, that now my lover was going away, and my trust-

worthy colleague had gone, he supposed I should hardly find it congenial to remain on at Gaunchester-Haugh alone with him. In this I quite agreed, privately, and was overjoyed to hear that he had decided to send me to school abroad, where, as I say, I have now been for a twelvemonth.

It was during the latter part of this term that Lola La Touche appeared upon the scene, and entered into my life, our subsequent friendship having an important bearing upon this story. She was three years older than I, and came to the school in the position of a junior monitress, having been sent thither by her parents (who were poor) to qualify for a governess. They were English people, but Lola was born and brought up in Paris, and had passed all her life there. She was a fine, handsome girl, of splendid physique; some people would have called her massive, others, voluptuous. Her wealth of bronze-brown hair, with a natural ripple in it, she wore coiled on her head in thick braids; when let down it reached nearly to the ground, and reminded me of Haidée's:

> Her hair's long auburn waves down to her heel
> Flow'd like an Alpine torrent which the sun
> Dyes with his morning light—and would conceal
> Her person if allow'd at large to run.

I never think that the best pen-and-ink description can convey a true idea of a person's face, and am sure that any attempt on my part to portray Lola's would be utterly futile. I have said she was handsome; but there was a peculiar charm about her beauty which grew upon you—a charm that cannot be put into words—a charm about the listless, sleepy look in her lovely, velvet-brown eyes, which she kept habitually half closed, and a general languor of expression, which earned from us the sobriquet of *loir* (dormouse)—a corruption, so to say, of her own name.

She had the most dazzling white skin I ever saw, a complexion so frequently accompanying that rich-tinted hair; full red lips, and a perfect set of teeth, which she displayed a good deal when laughing, though that was seldom, for Lola seemed too lazy to do more than smile. In short, she may be totalled up tersely and exactly in the lines:

> Somewhat large, and languishing, and lazy,
> Yet of a beauty that would drive you crazy.

But the lethargic look on her face, giving her almost an air of stupidity, belied her strangely, for she was by no means a fool; on the contrary, a shrewd, clever, and well-read girl, as I soon discovered; a student of Voltaire, Molière, Montaigne, Rousseau, and the best classical French writers; that is, she had studied them at home under the eyes of her parents, but from the time I knew her at the convent she seemed to show a decided preference for lighter literature, especially French novels of a nature which could be anything but improving to a woman's mind. By chance I dipped into one or two of these, but soon closed them with a blush. When I spoke to her about them, and asked why she wasted her time on such pernicious trash, she smiled in her quiet way, and said she did not see any more harm in the novels than in the daily papers, which everybody read.

"Besides, Mattie," she added, "I am a good deal older than you, remember, and have more experience of the world, consequently such books are not calculated to influence me as they might a very young girl like yourself. If you don't mind, dear, don't peep into them again."

I did not require to be asked not to do so. From the little I had read I had no desire to explore further; and notwithstanding Lola's somewhat matronly argument, was sorry in my heart that she should persist in this sort of recreation. However, that by the way. I had no business

to criticise her tastes; it was rather hers to take care of mine. Suffice it that I liked Lola. She had a smooth, irresistible way of endearing herself to you, and from liking I grew to love her—the acquaintance of a few months ripening into a warm friendship.

Very soon after I got to know her we exchanged confidences; that is, I told her a good deal about myself and my home, but heard very little in return. She seemed rather reticent as to her own affairs, whereas I was the reverse, quite the gushing little school-girl; but only to Lola, whom I had taken into my young heart, and intended to keep there—if I could. At the graphic description I gave of old Gaunchester-Haugh she was much interested; it roused her to enthusiasm.

"Delightful!" she exclaimed, as I finished my picture. "Now that is exactly the kind of dear old place I should love to live in; it must be beautiful—romantic and mysterious. I would give anything to see it."

"Why shouldn't you?" I answered at once. "I mean to try to take you back with me when I go. I shall ask my grandfather."

"Now what a little dear!" she rejoined, kissing me; "that's a sweet thought of yours—and you could hardly say less after my flagrant fishing, could you? Well, I should like it immensely."

"I'm not sure that you would, Loir," I said, with a doubtful smile.

"Why not?"

"Because my grandfather is rather a queer old man, and not easy to get on with—at least, I never found him so."

"Indeed! Weren't you happy at home, then?"

"Not altogether; yet in one way I was *very* happy."

And this led me to tell her of the great romance of my

life, and draw a still more graphic picture of its hero. Afterwards I often talked to her about Athol; indeed, like most lovers, I am afraid I fell into the fault of boring my friend somewhat about my *affaire du cœur*. Still, she was very good-natured, and never suffered me to see that I overtaxed her patience.

Directly I arrived at the convent, I wrote to Athol in India to give him my address, and since then we had corresponded, though not so regularly as I should have wished, owing to his regiment being in the field, and constantly moving about. Some parts of his letters which were most exciting, telling

> Of hair-breadth 'scapes i' the imminent deadly breach,

of marches and counter-marches, hardships and dangers, battles and victories, I read aloud to Lola, and doubtless this relieved the monotonous burden of my song—my daily dose of sentiment and panegyrics regarding him.

But to dismiss further mention of my school-days, as more or less uninteresting, and to come to the time, some ten months later, of our leaving the convent together, Lola and I, when I took her home with me to Gaunchester-Haugh, not as a guest, however, but as a finishing governess. This was under an arrangement made with my grandfather, partly on the recommendation of the Lady Superior, partly through my own intervention—an arrangement that suited Lola's shallow pocket, and ensured to me her companionship for a longer time than might otherwise have been the case.

As this private tutorage was advocated on the plea of my not having quite finished my studies, I was rather surprised that the General should remove me from the convent before I had done so; but flattered myself on reflection that he must have grown tired of solitude, and welcomed even a renewal of my society as a change.

And no doubt this was the case, for with all his rigour and harshness, I believe he did care for me a little, after his fashion. How soon that meagre affection was to be turned into distrust and aversion, and what stirring scenes were in store for us at Gaunchester-Haugh, never, I am sure, entered either into his head or mine to imagine.

Early summer—England in her loveliest garb greeted my return from the Continent. It was Lola's first visit to the mother country, and from the time we left Dover, she had been in a quiet trance of delight at the rich, varied landscape of each smiling county through which we passed, so widely different from the hill-less tracts and everlasting rows of poplars we had left behind. When at length the Gaunchester woods loomed in the distance, I pointed them out to her with some little pride, and as we drove up to the house in our open landau, felt that the old place was looking its very best.

We rolled over the Norman bridge, and once more I beheld the winding river, which brought a flood of childhood memories upon me and filled me with sadness, for, alas! how far away now was the dear boy with whom I associated that ancient structure, the river, and each familiar tree along its banks—with the greater sadness just at this time since I had not heard from him for several months. He had not answered my last three letters, and I was full of anxiety and apprehension about him. It never occurred to me to doubt his constancy, or to think that he had suddenly changed. I had far too much faith in his nature. His silence, I was sure, arose from some other cause. What? My heart shrank from the gloomy conjectures which forced themselves upon me. But, with an effort, I put away these tristful thoughts as we pulled up at the hall-door, and entered my grandfather's presence

with a smiling face. He received me graciously, almost affectionately, and Lola in a courteous manner which agreeably impressed her. We arrived shortly before dinner, and, as we went upstairs together to our rooms, she remarked :

"Why, Mattie dear, your grandfather is very different from what I expected ; I thought to find a surly old bear—but he is charming, quite a gentleman of the old school. I am sure I shall get on with him famously."

"I hope you will, dear," I replied ; "no doubt he can be very pleasant if he pleases, and I dare say I shall find him so now that the apple of discord between us is removed."

I thought, with a sigh, how much I wished that apple still hung in the home orchards at any cost of domestic harmony.

We had not time to unpack, so made no change in our *toilettes* for dinner, and went down together into the drawing-room a few minutes before the gong sounded. There we found the General awaiting us in scrupulously neat evening dress, as I ever remember him. He rose and came towards us, looking askance, as I fancied, at our travelling attire, upon which I ventured an apology.

"My dear child," he said kindly, laying his hand on my shoulder, "pray make no excuses ; I quite understand. Besides, you have no maid to help you—a deficiency, by-the-bye, which we must see about remedying."

Dear me, was this my grandfather talking ? I could not believe my ears. Truly a most pleasant change seemed to have come over his nature since we parted. Everything used to be conducted on such an economical, I may say parsimonious, scale at Gaunchester-Haugh, as I had good reason to recollect, that the mere suggestion of procuring me a lady's-maid appeared incredible, something too mar-

vellous to be true. And I am bound to add, such suggestion remained a chrysalis; it never developed into an act.

Presently Scroils announced dinner, and the General led the way into the dining-room, pompously as ever, with Lola on his arm, I following. It seemed strange to find myself once more in that sombre room, with its black-looking panels, watching my grandfather carving cleverly at the meat on his plate with his curved knife (as a child, I used to think this wonderful), and to feel, rather than see or hear, the cat-like Scroils prowling around us in attendance. But somehow, notwithstanding the underlying sadness about my absent lover, the gloomy atmosphere did not depress me that evening as it used to do when I was a little girl; perhaps because I felt grown up, and no longer stood, or rather sat, in awe of this great modern Timon at the head of the table. Moreover, he conversed with us most condescendingly during dinner, instead of preserving a deathlike silence as was his wont in days of yore, when the only sound audible in that quiet room was the soft jingle of glass and silver, like the tinkling of distant sleigh-bells. Then, as to the dinner itself, here was another vast improvement—soup, fish, and quite a choice of dishes, in place of the exceedingly stingy fare for which Gaunchester-Haugh was once so famous. Added to this, my grandfather actually asked us what wine we would drink—quite the crowning stroke of all! In short, a thorough transformation had taken place. I only hoped it might last.

We sat for a long time at the table, owing to the General's leisurely movements, which made dinner very tedious, and the twilight was giving way to darkness before we got up and left the room.

It was a lovely night, with a three-quarter moon just

rising above the black line of the yew woods, so Lola and I sauntered out into the garden together, leaving the General to his calf-skins in the den, whither he had repaired, as usual, from the dining-room. I wanted to take her to some of my beloved haunts, which would now be prettily bespangled with silver gleams; but she shrank from entering the old walks, dark and goblin-like as they looked at that hour, and preferred to explore them in the daytime. I laughed at her for her cowardice; and we wandered round to the other side of the house instead—towards the entrance-gates, through which we passed, and walked a little way down the carriage-drive. We had just turned, and were going back to the garden, when we heard rapid hoof-beats on the gravel drawing near, and in another few seconds a horseman loomed in sight. He whisked past us like an arrow, as if in great haste to reach the house. The closed gates stopped him, and he was some little time trying to open them; while he was doing so we overtook him.

As we came up he raised his hat, and said, in a breathless, excited manner:

"Pardon me, ladies, but can you tell me if General Crutwell is at home?"

I answered in the affirmative, wondering who he was, and what could be the matter.

From a brief glimpse of him in the moonlight I noticed that his face was of a deathly pallor, and that he had a long black moustache and heavy eyebrows, which gave him a dark, fierce look.

"I want to see him immediately," he continued, in the same tone. "May I trouble you?—my horse is so fidgety." He was still endeavouring to unfasten the gates from his saddle.

I opened them for him. He raised his hat again and

thanked me, then passed through quickly, and rode on at a brisk trot.

When we got back to the house we found Nathan leading the steaming horse up and down in front, and its rider gone indoors.

"Who is it, Nathan?" I asked.

"Don't know, miss. He's with the General in his room —something important, I reckon."

I was filled with curiosity, and paused for a moment as their voices reached us through the open window of the study. The stranger was speaking in the same excitable, agitated tones we had just heard, the General interrupting with ejaculations as of surprise or alarm. Some extraordinary communication was evidently being made to him. "Death and the devil! I'll send for the police immediately!" was one sentence I caught from the old man's lips. A quick, eager remonstrance came in reply, and we could hear the ominous words, "God protect you!—too late!—shocking murder!—imminent peril!"

Then the window was closed with a bang, and we heard no more.

CHAPTER IV.

A HIDDEN TERROR

Curiosity at once gave place to fear. What could be the meaning of those terrible words? Lola had heard them and shared my feelings. She stood trembling by my side. Instinctively I threw my arm round her, and we went into the house whispering wonderingly to each other. After

waiting for a few minutes in the drawing-room, I rang the bell for Scroils. It was answered instead by Harriet.

"Oh, Harriet, what *is* the matter?" I asked anxiously as she came into the room. "Who is that gentleman with the General?"

"I don't know, miss."

"Where is Scroils?"

"In the study, miss, with the master."

"I'm sure something dreadful has happened! I heard them talking. Who can this man be? Your husband opened the door to him, didn't he?"

"Yes, miss, and he said it was a Captain Somebody or other—quite a stranger to him. Ah! they're coming this way, miss." She withdrew at the approach of voices across the hall.

"Have the ladies come in yet, Scroils?" I heard my grandfather inquire.

"I'm not sure, sir."

"Go and see—request them to do so directly, and then fasten up the house."

"We are here, grandpapa," said I, going to the door.

"Oh, that's all right, my dear. I thought you were out in the garden still, and—and it's getting late and damp."

His voice sounded very peculiar—quite unlike his own. He gave some other direction to Scroils in a low tone, then turning to the stranger, who was standing in the middle of the hall, said:

"Will you come in here, Captain Zollern? This is my grand-daughter, Miss Freith."

I bowed slightly as they entered the room, and by the lamp-light stole another look at our visitor. He was handsome, beyond question, a very striking-looking man—a foreigner, I imagined, from his black drooping moustache

and the imperial he wore. But I only just glanced at him, for his eyes met mine directly and made me lower my gaze ; moreover, I was thinking little of his looks—those portentous words we had overheard haunted my ears, and I waited with quick-beating heart to know the cause of this unusual visit—in expectancy of some startling revelation. But evidently we were not to be enlightened at present. The remarks that followed were of the most ordinary kind, albeit I could see they were entirely forced.

"As this gentleman's business has brought him over here rather late," the General said to me with calm constraint, "I have prevailed upon him to stay the night with us."

Captain Zollern smiled, and murmured that "he was most happy, and that my grandfather was very kind."

"I would gladly send for your things," continued the General, "but just at this hour, and being some distance off, I——"

"Oh, I beg you will not speak of it—I shall manage very well."

I presumed he was staying at an hotel in the nearest town; he could scarcely be a resident of the neighbourhood, or Scroils would at least have known him by name. *I* certainly had never seen him before.

My grandfather appeared very restless, and had not sat down since entering the room, but kept walking from one part to another while he spoke. After a few minutes he went to the door, saying :

"If you'll excuse me, Captain Zollern, I will leave you with the ladies for a little, as I have something to——"

He withdrew without finishing his sentence. Lola and I were alone with our mysterious visitor. His recent excitement, from whatever cause, had somewhat quieted down, while my grandfather seemed still in a perturbed

state as the result of his visit. Captain Zollern now spoke in a more natural manner, and said politely after the General had gone out:

"I believe it was you, Miss Freith, whom I had to thank for opening the gates for me?" I inclined my head. "I feel I owe you ladies an apology for my scant courtesy at the time, but I was rather in a hurry."

This gave me an opening, so I replied:

"Excuse my asking—I don't wish to appear inquisitive—but you were excited, agitated, and I could not help overhearing something you said to General Crutwell in his study, which has frightened me. You have come upon some serious matter, sir, have you not?"

Without answering at once, he rose with an air of deliberation, and changed his seat to another chair nearer the sofa, on which we were sitting.

After slight hesitation, he rejoined:

"I am extremely sorry to have alarmed you. I—I would not do so unnecessarily, but—ar—yes, I must confess, it is rather serious. I trust, however, my coming to-night may have averted—ar—any danger."

"Danger! To whom? Pray explain." I put the question quickly, almost imperiously.

"Forgive me. I—I cannot say more at this moment."

Hitherto Lola had remained silent, still as a statue, white to the lips, and with her beautiful eyes widely opened.

"But what kind of danger?" she now asked timorously; "surely we may know that—to know the worst, and be prepared for it, would be infinitely preferable to this uncomfortable mystery. I shall be quite afraid to go to bed to-night."

"Oh, you need not be. I—I think there is little likelihood of your being disturbed——"

"But I *am* afraid. I feel thoroughly worked up into a state of nervous dread," she exclaimed, rising from the sofa abruptly and crossing the room. "Pray don't keep us in this uncertainty; such feeble reassurances are calculated to terrify us ten times more."

"Ladies, believe me, I would willingly enlighten you at once if I could," he remonstrated politely, "but I am bound in confidence not to do so—that is, my lips are sealed for to-night; but," in a quieting tone, "pray be patient; ere long you will doubtless know all, and—and understand."

"Well, I suppose it is useless to press you further," Lola replied, coming back to the sofa, "and we must continue in unblissful ignorance. *Plaisant, n'est-ce pas, ma chère?*" turning to me with a smile, and shrugging her shoulders like a Frenchwoman. "I scarcely anticipated such a reception on my very first evening in England."

"Indeed! you have just returned from abroad?" he inquired, as if glad to change the conversation.

"I can hardly say 'returned,' for I have never been in England before. This is my first visit. Miss Freith and I only came over from the Continent to-day."

"Ah! and *you* arrived this evening, too?" he exclaimed, looking at me as if in surprise; adding in an undertone, "how very strange!"

"Why is it very strange?" I asked, wondering what he meant; then explanatorily, "but it is not *my* first visit; this is my home; I am General Crutwell's grand-daughter, as you heard. I have been away at a French school for the last two years."

"Exactly; I see. Well, no doubt you are glad to get back again."

"Under other circumstances I might be, but I am not sure that I feel particularly jovial at the prospect of being murdered in my bed directly I return," I answered, with

grim humour, "for that's what all this mysterious alarm seems to portend."

"Oh, pray don't talk in that way, Miss Freith," he rejoined, in a quick, deprecating tone, "pray don't imagine anything so dreadful. I—I am truly grieved to be the indirect cause of your uneasiness; *I* certainly shouldn't have told you anything to raise a panic. I am only sorry you overheard what you did."

He might have intended to allay our fears, but his manner, and the way in which he spoke, were far from having that effect.

Presently he rose from his chair with a slight shiver, and turned to the window, which was partly opened.

"Don't you feel the night air rather chilly?" he said. "Will you allow me to close this?"

"Thank you, perhaps it would be wiser."

"I think so—much wiser."

He said it in a marked tone, as he went to the window. He was in the act of shutting it, but suddenly stopped, and opening it instead still wider, leant head and shoulders out into the shimmering moonlight. He remained in this position for several seconds, as if listening intently.

Lola and I looked at each other, but without speaking. Now I cannot explain the how or the why, but there was that in his manner and action so significant, yet unaccountable, such a creepiness about him—to use a modern mongrelism—that I felt my blood turn to icy rivulets—I could not bear it. I jumped up from the sofa, exclaiming:

"What is it? What do you hear?"

Lola seized my arm, and held it fast.

He made no answer. Again I asked: "What is it you hear? What are you listening like that for?"

He lifted up his hand to hush me, and, after another pause, drew back into the room, and shut the window

quickly. As he turned towards us I thought his face had grown paler—more deadly pale even than before; this might have been fancy, my feelings were much wrought upon; but most certainly he was in a state of painful apprehension from some inexplicable cause.

"It's nothing, it's nothing," he observed carelessly. "I merely thought I heard a noise outside, a rather peculiar sound; but no doubt I was mistaken." He rose, crossed to the door, and came back again. "How long do you think the General will be?" he asked.

"I really can't say."—I answered him rather snappishly.

"And what time do you ladies think of retiring?"

"Not at all," I returned as abruptly. "Good gracious! You cannot suppose we could go to bed and sleep, frightened out of our wits as we are by all this mystery? For mercy's sake, sir, tell me, what *is* the matter? What *is* the danger?"

"Don't press me to-night, I beg of you; by-and-by you shall know more—all. As I have said, the danger is guarded against. Let me persuade you now to go to bed, ladies, and rest yourselves after your long journey. You will be safe—quite safe."

His words sounded like mockery; tired though we were, we well knew that neither of us would close an eye that night. My grandfather now came back into the room. Captain Zollern was near the door as he opened it, and murmured something to him in a low tone, whereat the General started, and exchanging a significant glance with his visitor, urged also that we must surely be fatigued from travelling, and begged us to retire. I saw he was in no mood to be communicative, so abstained from questioning him, and, after a little while, went upstairs with Lola, though not to bed. As we said good night, Captain Zollern held out his hand, but I drew back and bowed coldly. It was a strange

impulse—I could not quite understand it; for the man had tried to convey to us that his presence was a sort of safeguard. Yet I did not feel this. Some powerful instinct told me that he was not here as a friend, and that his coming boded us no good.

I took Lola to my room. Of course we never thought of parting company for that night, and agreed to sit up together and improve the occasion by unpacking.

We were glad of that occupation, but all the while could only think and talk of the one subject—of this handsome stranger and the alarm he had given us. We exchanged various conjectures as to the cause of his mysterious visit, but ended in being as much mystified as ever It was the indefinite, the unexplained, that so enhanced our feelings of dread and apprehension.

Present fears are less than horrible imaginings.

"I am afraid this will give you a bad impression of my home, Loir," I said apologetically, "to be terrified in such a way the moment you come into it. I am so sorry, dear; it's enough to make you feel nervous ever afterwards in the old place."

"Oh, no; I shall soon get over it," she replied quietly. "Besides, there may be nothing, after all, to be frightened at; it's silly to get upon wires and fancy the worst. The man said there was no danger; doubtless we shall have an explanation in the morning."

"I suppose so. I hope we shall."

"But we may get it before then."

"How?"

"I mean something may happen in the night to solve the mystery."

"Good gracious! What do you think will happen, Lola?"

"Of course I haven't the least idea, but I am quite sure

that that Captain Zollern, from his manner, anticipates something, and so does General Crutwell."

I was sure of that also. Now, I am not naturally a coward—perhaps my nerves are stronger than most girls'—but on this occasion they were thoroughly unstrung, and I may honestly confess that in all my life I never felt more cowed and timid than I did throughout that night of suspense, with this unknown spirit of evil—this cacodemon of imagined peril—hovering over us. And our old house was just such a ghostly, rambling building as might be chosen for the scene of some uncanny legend.

We finished our unpacking at length, and taking off our travelling-dresses, etc., put on our dressing-gowns; then, to further pass the time, Lola took down her beautiful hair, which I brushed out for her in front of the glass, as I often used to do at school. While so engaged we conversed in undertones, but every now and then paused to listen at the slightest noise that disturbed the midnight quiet. Happily it was summer, and dawn would soon come to our relief; it would have been far worse to have kept broad vigil on the tenterhooks of terror throughout the long hours of a winter night.

Towards morning a breeze sprang up, and soughed through the tops of the lofty elms which swayed to and fro around the mansion. It was pleasant to hear it—it was company; but at the same time as it grew in strength it gave extra food to our worked-up imaginations, and mingled wildest fancies with tamest facts in the subdued chaos of sounds. Amid the methodical cracks and creaks of the rickety doors, windows, and furniture, and the incomprehensible thumps and thuds at intervals, now close by, now afar off, which one hears at night when the wind is playing about the house, we imagined every minute something suspicious, some stealthy sign, such as a whisper just out-

side, the soft step of a person prowling along the passage, the cautious opening and shutting of a distant door—in fact, a hundred timorous fancies all gravitating towards one point, a solution of the mystery which so exercised our brains. But they were not all fancies; others besides ourselves were on the watch and listening—restless spirits moving about the building in "the silent dead of night." Once or twice in the small hours I heard and recognised with quite a feeling of relief the substantial, unmuffled tread of my grandfather in an adjoining corridor, by which I knew that he, at all events, had not yet gone to bed.

At last the pale gray of morning crept into the room, and as it gradually grew lighter we regained confidence. By now both Lola's eyes and mine were beginning to draw straws, for we were quite worn out, and longing to get into bed, so I suggested drowsily that we should do so. But ere we could summon even energy enough to carry out the intention, we dozed off where we were—Lola on the sofa, I in an arm-chair.

Mine, however, was a dog's sleep, and in my half-waking dreams I continually heard footsteps pacing the gravel path below, and men's voices. I opened my eyes, and heard them still. It was now broad daylight. I went to the window, and, peeping out from behind the blind, saw my grandfather and Captain Zollern walking up and down underneath. So nothing had happened after all! Apparently nothing. What the danger really was to which we had been exposed was not revealed to me until some time afterwards, and then only in strictest confidence.

The vague terrors of the night evaporated under the bright morning sun, and I felt secure. I looked at the time; it was only a quarter past five—much too early to begin the day, dead tired as I was. Lola was still slumbering peacefully upon the sofa. It seemed a pity to disturb

her, but she would be more comfortable in bed, so I woke her up; and, slipping off our things, we turned into the cool, grateful sheets together, and in less than another two minutes were both fast locked in sleep.

CHAPTER V.

A DOUBTFUL EXPLANATION

Twelve o'clock was striking when I awoke. I looked round the room, puzzled at first to know where I was, and with a vague impression of having been visited by some horrible nightmare. But a glance at Lola's sleeping form beside me brought back directly the sensation of the previous evening, and I understood why I felt so half rested, as if I had only come home from a ball a couple of hours ago. But a cold bath soon put me all right, as it did Lola, who seemed more refreshed by her morning's sleep, and we went downstairs together at luncheon-time. The gong had sounded about five minutes when we entered the dining-room, where we found the General and Captain Zollern already seated at the table. I was rather surprised that the man had not left before now, but no doubt he was waiting to see us and tender some explanation ere he took his departure. In this I was mistaken.

"Good morning, Miss La Touche," said my grandfather, rising graciously and shaking hands with her; "morning, Mattie, my dear," and he kissed me. "I must remind you that time and tide, and the rules of Gaunchester-Haugh, wait for no man—or lady either. As you did not come down to breakfast, I didn't know whether to expect you at

luncheon. Harriet told me you were both fast asleep, so I would not have you wakened; I knew you would be tired after travelling."

"Yes, we were—very tired, grandpapa," I replied, adding drily, "but neither Miss La Touche nor I closed our eyes till five this morning."

Here I threw a semi-reproachful glance at our foreign-looking friend opposite, to whom we both bowed distantly and took our places at the table. He smiled pleasantly, and murmured something about being "extremely sorry to hear of our sleepless night."

"Never closed your eyes till five o'clock! How was that, Mattie?" said the General.

"I think you need scarcely ask, grandpapa; if I mistake not, *you* didn't go to bed at all."

"You are quite right, I did not."

"Well, since the danger, I presume, is now passed—if there was any—will you kindly enlighten us as to what all that alarm meant last night?"

"Certainly, you shall know. May I give you some of this hashed duck, Miss La Touche, or will you have some cold lamb?"

"Some lamb, if you please."

Captain Zollern cut some, and as he handed it to Lola I saw him gazing very searchingly and admiringly at her soft, dreamy face. She looked particularly handsome this morning, notwithstanding our dissipated hours—her wavy bronze hair carelessly done up, with tiny truant curls toying with her Parian-white neck, her dress a narrowly striped muslin, unmistakably Parisian in make. I felt rather insignificant beside her; I always did, but used to console myself with the gross flattery of some of my schoolfellows who averred that I was the better-looking of the two, and called me, jocularly, *la belle de couvent*. I did not believe

them, but I also recollected what Athol had said many a time, and began to think there must be something in my looks after all, despite my grandfather's very opposite opinion. He often used to go out of his way, I considered, to tell me what a particularly plain girl I was. No doubt he was very right, and had his reasons; I suppose he wished to make me unconceited and lowly-minded. However, on the strength of Athol's better opinion and that of my school flatterers, I am tempted to describe myself, though I well know any such self-description, however truthful, must appear more or less vain. But this is an age of self-advertising, and if I modestly abstain from giving you my portrait now, I don't quite see who else is going to do so at this period of the narrative. Therefore, with all apologies to the great guns of art and canons of good taste, here goes *à l'avertissement*. Height, five feet four and a half; figure, slight and graceful; hands and feet, small; hair, raven-black, and plenty of it; eyes, also black, large, and liquid; brow, rather broad and square; nose, straight and thin, like my grandfather's; mouth, elastic, with rose-red lips — in repose small, in laughter wide, as though proud of the ivories inside; complexion, a rich mingling of carnation and palest olive (*en passant*, that's a quotation—I heard somebody else call it so, and I cannot think of any other colouring to describe my skin). Altogether, may I say a tolerably pretty girl of the brunette type? I also wore a gossamer frock, like Lola's, but younger in the make and not quite so artistic. And there I am before you.

"Now, Mattie, you are eating nothing," said my grandfather. "And considering you have had no breakfast——"

"I am waiting to hear about last night, sir. I really cannot eat till you tell me——"

"Can't you, indeed? What, does your curiosity take away your appetite?"

"It gives me too much food for reflection, which is the same thing. I can think of nothing else till I know; pray tell me."

"All in good time," returned the old man provokingly; "have patience, my dear, and eat your luncheon. Your curiosity is equally great, I presume, Miss La Touche?"

"I am afraid it is, sir," replied Lola, smiling; "but I do not let it come between me and my commissariat. I felt nearly famished just now."

"I am sure you must have done so after your long fast. Ah, I see you are a sensible young lady. Let me recommend you that salad."

"Allow me, Miss La Touche." Captain Zollern helped her to some, and again I caught him scrutinising, almost gloating, over her sweet face and splendid figure. He was evidently much struck with her. Perhaps he had been so on the previous evening, but if he had, I was then too much preoccupied and excited to notice it. I now took a more careful survey of him. No, he certainly did not look like an Englishman. Nor was he one, as I ascertained, but a Hungarian—an ex-officer of the Austrian army. His foreign accent, however, was very slight, scarcely perceptible. I have already said that he was handsome; but the more I saw of his face, the less I liked it. It was a sly, cunning cast of countenance; and though I am no physiognomist, I could imagine him, from his eyes and the cut of his mouth, to be capable of cruelty. He had peculiar eyes, of a hard gray colour, which shifted from yours as you met them and if you persevered in your look, yet seemed to be still keeping you under their focus in a side-glance; crafty eyes, which appeared to betray a spirit lurking within widely at variance with that conveyed by the outer *bonhomie* of his manner. He looked rather older by day than by night, for I observed that his black

moustache and imperial were slightly touched with gray; but not so his close-cut hair. I caught him gazing at me, as well as at Lola, several times during luncheon with a queer, inquiring look, as if he could not quite make me out—altogether different from the ardent expression, as of admiration, which he bestowed upon her. I felt inclined to resent this staring propensity of his, and gave him back once a very severe, haughty glare, with which I meant to freeze him up, as our Transatlantic cousins say. But it failed in its impression, for I caught him distinctly smiling, under cover of his heavy moustache, and this made me turn quite hot and angry.

Meanwhile my affected non-appetite (for I was in reality hungry) did not appear to hurry my grandfather in gratifying our curiosity, so I paid more attention to the luncheon, and finished my plate of hashed duck ere I ventured again to press him.

"Now, grandpapa, what *is* this great mystery?" said I at length. "See, I have eaten to oblige you, so oblige me in return."

"Well, well, it is no great mystery after all," he replied, though with some hesitation. "The fact is, Captain Zollern got to know by accident of a daring scheme for breaking into this house last night—by a—a notorious character; of a proposed burglary, in short. But don't be alarmed; all precautions have been taken. Forewarned is forearmed, and, thanks to Captain Zollern, we are quite ready to receive the miscreant or miscreants whenever they like to come. We owe this gentleman a great debt of gratitude for his kindness in riding over last night on purpose to put us on our guard."

"Oh, not at all, General Crutwell; surely any man would have done the same," modestly protested Captain Zollern. "I am only glad if my coming was of service; it

rather seems as if our burglaring friends had got wind of it, and so left you alone."

"It does ; yes, it certainly does look like it."

"But won't they wait and come another night ?" said I.

"They may ; of course there's no telling," said my grandfather ; "but they'll find us on the alert if they do. You young ladies need not be afraid, I have given notice to the police, and taken other precautionary steps. Moreover, this gentleman is kind enough to stay on with us for two or three days in case of anything arising. Oh, by-the-bye, Captain Zollern, I mustn't forget to send a man over for your things."

"Thank you, General Crutwell ; I am only sorry to give that trouble."

Now up to this point I had been taken in, and believed what they told us, but suddenly my quick eyes detected another half-concealed smile on our visitor's face. He was staring steadily down into his plate while the General was speaking, but neither the attitude nor the mask of his large moustache could altogether hide that smile. I knew directly they were deceiving us for some inscrutable reason, and felt puzzled, indignant. This cock-and-bull story about burglars was all a blind. I thought their remarks did not sound very natural—there was not a true ring about them—they were not genuine. If it had been no more than a contemplated attack of house-breakers, why should this Captain Zollern have betrayed such abject nervousness about the matter last night, unless he were the most arrant coward that ever wore a sword ? Why should he show such fear and agitation on our account, who were not even casual acquaintances of his ? It was altogether preposterous ; I dismissed the explanation with contempt, and rather electrified my grandfather by my candour.

"Excuse me," I said coolly, "but what you have told us is not true."

"What do you mean, Mattie? How dare you!" exclaimed the General.

I saw him flush; from anger or consciousness? The latter, I think.

"I repeat that this tale of burglars is not true, or, to put it more delicately, utter bosh—got up to deceive us. The cause of all that trepidation and mystification last night had nothing to do with house-breakers."

"You are very shrewd, Miss Mattie, exceedingly shrewd," said my grandfather, with lofty severity; "but you don't seem to have improved much in manners from your residence abroad. I will thank you to conduct yourself like a lady in my house." This, before a stranger, was too much, and again I saw Captain Zollern smiling. I turned scarlet, and half rose from the table. "There, there, sit down, my dear"—the General extended his bony hand over my head, as though he would double me up like an indiarubber Jack-in-the-box—"we need not argue the point. You asked for an explanation, and I gave you one; accept it or not, as you please."

There was no more to be said. I held my tongue, and shortly afterwards we adjourned from the dining-room.

I was not convinced—far from it—but considerably perplexed; and found on consulting Lola that she thought, as I did, that there was something behind all this—something which my grandfather and Captain Zollern were keeping dark.

That latter gentleman extended his visit to five days, and, although he made himself extremely agreeable to us girls, and never lost an opportunity of cultivating our society, especially Lola's, I could not get over the first feelings of awe and antipathy wherewith he had inspired

me. The cloud of mystery in which he had so suddenly descended into our midst had not yet been dispelled satisfactorily, and, until it was, my distrust would survive. But he never swerved from the original explanation, although I pressed him on the subject. Each night we took due precautions against any possible visit from these supposed gentlemen of the mask and "jemmy;" but as familiarity breeds contempt, so each night we girls thought less of the danger of any attack, and each night strengthened our doubt as to the likelihood of any such event.

At length Captain Zollern took his departure. He had evidently ingratiated himself to an unusual extent with my adamant relative, for I heard the old man pressing him to renew his visit as soon as possible. Captain Zollern, however, feared that he should not be able to avail himself of this invitation, as he expected to be returning shortly to his native land. But *should anything unforeseen arise* in the meanwhile, he added significantly, he would come down again to Gaunchester-Haugh at once and without fail. This promise seemed to gratify my grandfather, and he let him go with that understanding.

CHAPTER VI.

HOW I RESORT TO STRATAGEM TO RELIEVE MY MIND

ALTHOUGH these first few days after my return from abroad had been filled up, so to speak, by a certain amount of excitement and novelty, which tended to relieve depression, I never forgot for a moment the one absorbing interest of my life. My thoughts were ever taking flight to the land

of Ind, my anxiety ever on the increase about Athol, of whom I had had no tidings for so long. Oh, what had happened to my boy? Was he ill? Or—dreadful thought! —had he fallen at last in one of those fierce, unequal struggles with a savage foe? Such thought was torture—I could not bear to dwell upon it; nor could I tolerate this painful suspense for another day. I must find out about him at once. But how? With this feudal barrier separating our house from the parsonage, I could not possibly go straight up to the latter and make my inquiries. No; I must devise a little stratagem. I must see Mr. Kelso himself without delay. There was no one else to ask, except the servants, whom I could not get at; Mrs. Kelso was an invalid, confined to the house; and Athol, like me, was an only child, with no convenient brothers and sisters to help one at such a time. The old Scotchman, therefore, was my only chance. He had not seen me since I went to school in France, and before that seldom and generally at a distance, so I thought he would be very unlikely to recognise me now. My idea, then, was to go to his church next Sunday with Lola, to waylay him after the service, and get into conversation with him about his sermon.

To-day was Saturday—it must be to-morrow—so at dinner that night I blurted out in an offhand manner: "Oh, by-the-bye, grandpapa, do you mind my going to Chepslow Church to-morrow morning with Miss La Touche?"

He looked at me in surprise, and answered shortly:

"I would rather you didn't—why?"

"Because we want to hear Mr. Kelso preach."

"Indeed! I think you will do very well without. Tollingham Church is only half-a-mile further off, and the man you will hear there is a good man and a true Christian."

"So everybody says of Mr. Kelso, grandpapa," I ventured.

"I don't wish to hear what everybody says," returned the General curtly, "I—I am not governed by public opinion. Please to change the subject."

But I was no longer a baby to be snubbed in this sort of manner, and continued, after a minute, knowing all the while that I was coaxing up a storm:

"Well, whatever he may be, grandpapa, we are both anxious to hear him preach, so I hope you won't mind sinking your prejudice for once in a way."

"Don't presume to talk to me about my prejudices, young lady," was the crushing retort; "you forget yourself, I think. I say I shall *not* give my approval to your going to that church. You can do as you please about it, but if you choose to go, understand me, it will be entirely against my wishes."

This was meant to be a finisher, and I pretended to collapse.

"Very well, grandpapa," I replied meekly, with a sigh as of resignation; then, in a tone of mild argument, "but surely little Mr. Lectern's preaching is a very poor substitute—not to be compared with Mr. Kelso's——"

"What do you know about it? You have never heard the other man. Mr. Lectern may not give you such a flashy, theatrical sermon, but, take my word for it, there will be more truth and godliness in it. However, let all that be as it may, you know my objections, that is enough. And let me request you, Mattie, never to bring Mr. Kelso's name up again at my table or in my house; it is not very good taste on your part to do so, but—perhaps you have forgotten; be good enough to recollect in future."

I stole a glance at Lola, and saw by the expression on her face that she was beginning to understand what I meant when I told her about my grandfather's peculiarities.

Now what was I to do? I was bent upon seeing Mr. Kelso as soon as possible, even if I did not attend his church, and the one act would be just as seditious as the other in the eyes of my grandfather, therefore I thought we might as well go. Accordingly, after a little trouble, I over-persuaded Lola, and we did go, leaving it to chance whether the General discovered the fact or not.

After the service we loitered in the churchyard, reading the inscriptions on the tombstones near the vestry-door, until Mr. Kelso came out. Then Lola, as planned, seized her opportunity and appealed to him as pastor of the parish to give her certain information about one Eliza Sparks, who lay beneath a stone, the epitaph on which we were then deciphering. It was old and weather-beaten, and had been put up long before Mr. Kelso's time. He could not give her the information.

"You are strangers here, I think," he said, speaking with a Scotch accent, and looking at us inquiringly; "at least I have niver had the pleesure of seeing ye in my church before."

Then he did not know me. That was a relief anyway. But I hardly expected he would.

"Yes, we are," replied Lola, with a little economy of the truth. "And as strangers will you permit us to offer a tribute of praise—an expression of thanks for the beautiful sermon we have just heard?"

He looked pleased.

"I am glad ye liked it," he said. "I endeavour to be plain and understood; but I'm no so sure that I always succeed. They tell me I go over the heads of my congregation, which is vary likely, for they're puir, simple-minded folks hereaboots. Ech, it's a treat, I assure ye, to see fresh and intelligent faces like yours under my pulpit."

We acknowledged the point-blank compliment by a smile.

I could not help thinking, as I looked at the square-shouldered old parson before me, what a strong contrast there was between him and his son—between the tall, handsome Athol, with his aristocratic face and figure, and the rather squabby, coarse-looking old man, his father. Mr. Kelso was quite the typical Hielander, with a much be-freckled face, light red hair and whiskers—in which "silver threads among the gold" now predominated—large bony hands, also freckled (he wore no gloves), and broad, angular frame, the great width of his shoulders detracting from his height. There was a humorous look in his pale-blue eye, with its invisible lashes—a kindly twinkle, which softened his features. When he turned to speak to Lola I searched his face, and fancied I saw in it other signs of the milk of human kindness which I was glad to find there.

"I was much struck by your earnest allusion to our poor soldiers in the far East, Mr. Kelso," I said presently, with enforced composure. "It is indeed a dreadful time for them. Have you any relations in India?"

"I have one, yes—my son is in the Ninety-thard."

"I trust he was well when you last heard?"

"I canna say that exactly, for he has been vary near goin' over to the majority, poor lad—at death's door, they tell me."

I gave a gasp—a start. Mr. Kelso looked at me. He saw the effect of his words, but perhaps attributed it only to a natural womanly feeling of mine on hearing of a fellow-creature's sufferings.

"He got badly wounded," he went on to say, "some four months back, in a wee bit skir-rmish, after having got free through mony a big battle. Niver a line have we had since, except from the adjutant of the regiment, joost to tell us that he was still alive and goin' on as well as could be expected."

Ah! now I understood; it was as I dreaded; he had been wounded, near to his death—sick and in lingering pain. My poor darling! But, thank God, he was still spared.

"Then he is better—he is recovering?" I asked, with a superhuman effort to hide my anxiety. Nevertheless, my voice trembled; I felt I was fast betraying myself.

"He is, I am thankful to say," replied Mr. Kelso, again looking at me rather narrowly, "and, please heaven, he'll be coming home on sick leave in a few weeks' time." He paused, then inquired, rather abruptly: "Pardon me, but whom have I the pleasure of——"

"Miss La Touche," said Lola, coming to my rescue.

"And *your* name, may I ask?" turning to her as she spoke.

"That is mine."

"What! ye're sisters, then?"

Lola bowed and smiled equivocally.

"Nay, surely that's not so. I niver saw two young ladies more deefferent in looks."

My cheeks were all ablaze. I felt them glowing like red-hot coals. To stand on that sacred ground and act a lie, even though we did not utter one, to the very clergyman himself, made me blush fiercely. Lola coloured also. Between the tell-tale cheeks of us both we roused his suspicions.

"You'll excuse me," he said, with a shrewd glance, "but ye're no sisters."

"Well, no—not exactly," Lola admitted. "I merely meant to say——"

"Sisters-in-law, perhaps?"

This was getting awkward. We both shunned a deliberate falsehood, and saw that the old Scotchman meant to find out who we were.

"And are ye staying in the neighbourhood?" he continued, taking another forced smile as an answer to his last query; "or did ye drive over to church from Kellingsby?"

He was now staring hard at my peony countenance. I managed to answer collectedly:

"We are staying near here."

"Yes, *vary* near, I ken; joost over the water, if I am not mistaken," tossing his thumb at the river. "Ah, yes—yes—to be sure—I'm much obliged to ye, Miss Freith, for your kind inquiries aboot my son." I felt it was coming. "I didn't know ye at fir-rst, and ye've grown since ye went abroad. Um—it is long since I had the pleasure of seeing ony one from Gaunchester-Haugh inside my church. Your grandfather is well, I hope?"

"Quite well, I thank you." A pause.

"And so ye've not forgotten the lad?" with another shrewd look into my face. "Aweel, he'll soon be with us again now. He was but a raw chap when he went away, but 'home-keepin' youth hath iver homely wits.' Let us hope travelling and soldiering have improved him, and knocked all the nonsense out of his noddle. Ye know what I mean! Well, our meeting to-day is an accident, of course, but I'm glad to have seen ye, and looking so well. Good morning, good morning." He held out his great hand, and I shook it feebly, though I felt inclined to give it a good squeeze, in gratitude for his information; then, with a snatch at his shovel-hat, he went on his way and left us both looking rather foolish, I am afraid—me, at any rate.

"What a queer old man, Mattie!" said Lola laughingly, as soon as the parson was out of earshot. "But he's sharp enough—he saw we did it on purpose. Do you think he'll tell the General?"

"I don't know," I answered absently, and with my

large black eyes staring into space, where I beheld my winsome lover lying prostrate with suffering and looking, oh, so wan and wasted from his former self.

"I do hope he won't," Lola continued.

"I cannot help it if he does," I said, still too much preoccupied with thoughts of Athol to give other matters due consideration. "I have found out what I wanted, and my mind is easier."

"And that's all you care about, Miss Mattie!" returned Lola, in some surprise—no wonder! "Think what trouble *I* shall get into as your female mentor if your grandfather hears of this."

"Ah, true, I forgot, dear; pray forgive me," I exclaimed quickly, now coming to myself. "But I'll take all the blame; you shan't suffer."

Though I said this, I didn't feel at all confident that my assurance was worth very much; and the memory of poor Miss Pridden's abrupt dismissal flashed across me most uncomfortably. I reproached myself for my selfishness, and only hoped I might not lose Lola in the same way through my wayward indiscretion. My feeling of thankfulness in having gleaned, or rather filched this intelligence about Athol, was, therefore, much qualified by one of apprehension lest my grandfather should find out what I had done—that he should detect me repeating the wilful acts of my childhood immediately I came back to his roof.

I was considerably relieved, then, on our return from Chepslow Church, at his asking no questions, and appearing to accept it as a matter of course that we had been to Tollingham instead.

CHAPTER VII.

THE MORNING MAIL

A FEW mornings afterwards brought us an eventful post. I came down to the breakfast-table as my grandfather was rummaging the letter-bag, and just when he had extracted from its leathern depths a black-edged letter addressed to himself, and sealed with a large black seal. This letter evidently excited his curiosity, for he at once fixed his gold-rimmed glasses on his nose and looked closely at the writing. Without waiting to take out the rest of the morning's budget, he broke the seal and read. I watched his face while he did so, and gathered from its expression that the contents of that black-bordered sheet were of considerable importance. He read it quickly at a first glance, and started up from his chair with an exclamation, whether of surprise or emotion I could hardly tell. Then he went to the window and read it again more deliberately. My curiosity, in turn, was aroused by his manner, and I wondered whom the letter was from. It was probably to announce somebody's death. Whose? Poor Aunt Anna's, perhaps; he had no other relative or friend in the world that I knew of.

"Any bad news, grandpapa?" I ventured to ask.

He took no notice of the question, but remained up by the window staring at the sheet in his hand with a look on his face which I now saw was one of anything but sorrow, rather of relief or satisfaction. Perhaps some one had unexpectedly left him a thumping legacy. I could think of no other explanation of that serene, satisfied look.

"No bad news, grandpapa, I hope?" I ventured again, laying stress on the "bad."

"Eh, what, Mattie?" I had roused him from his preoccupation at last. "Bad news?—Well, no, not exactly —ehem—that is, something rather sudden; but not about anybody you know—nothing you would understand."

Then it *was* a legacy. I thought as much.

"May I look if there is anything for me, grandpapa?"

"Certainly."

I did so, while he still stood at the window, with his back towards me. This was rather lucky, for the very next letter I pulled out was one from India, forwarded from the convent—a letter for me at last from Athol. I say it was lucky, because though I had looked and longed to hear from my soldier-lover, I rather dreaded a revival of hostilities between myself and the General, when he should discover that Athol and I corresponded. The strength of my love, and the strength of the old man's opposition, drove me to deception and underhand proceedings. And here I had a chance of keeping things quiet yet a little longer, by slipping the letter into my pocket unobserved. I just did this in time, for my grandfather now came back from the window and took his seat again at the table.

"Was there anything for you, Mattie?" he inquired, emptying out the rest of the bag.

"Only one from the school, grandpapa" (a pardonable quibble)—"not very interesting, I expect. Dear me! Lola's late; she must have overslept herself. I'll run up and hurry her," and I rose from the table, when my grandfather put out his hand and pulled me towards him.

Ha! I was caught after all! But if so, he was acting a very deep part, probably to give extra effect to his attack, for I had never seen him look at me so kindly, so affectionately.

"You have not kissed me this morning, little child," he

said, drawing me down and pressing his lips to my guilty red cheeks twice, quite warmly. True, he generally kissed me of a night and morning now (a thing he very seldom did when I was in short frocks), but not in this sort of manner. It took me by surprise. I never could understand my grandfather, and I supposed I never should.

All at once the unworthy thought came into my head that somebody had left *me* a legacy, that that was what he had learnt from the funereal-looking letter, and why he was so pleased and loving. How little I guessed the true reason!

I returned his two kisses with one, half timid, half apologetic, as if I felt it was quite a presumption, and that he could not really appreciate it; then ran out of the room and upstairs two steps at a time, little traitor as I was, dying to read my boy's letter. In the same breath I told Lola that the General was at breakfast, and that I had heard at last from Athol—"would she make haste and go down, like a dear, and keep the old man company while I examined my Indian news?"

"Certainly; she would be down in half-a-minute," and congratulated me with a kiss.

In the sanctity of my own little room I tore open my lover's letter with trembling, eager fingers, and the while I greedily devoured the three closely written sheets my heart thumped audibly, beating quick time to the rapid perusal. I would fain have dwelt on every dear word, but was afraid to stop upstairs very long for fear I should rouse my grandfather's suspicions—conscience makes such cowards of us—so merely scrambled through the pages, promising myself a supplementary feast at leisure after breakfast. And it was a feast, but a feast of sweets mingled with bitter—to know and think of all he had suffered. That letter seemed to speak. As I read it I could almost declare I heard the

voice of him I loved so well; but the writing in places was uncertain—many of the syllables left unfinished, showing that he had written with much difficulty, when ill and in pain. Poor dear boy! He began by explaining the cause of his long silence, which I had already learnt from his father; then went on:

"I know it will take me days to finish this, little Mattie darling, for I can only do a bit at a time, but I wouldn't get another fellow to write for me—to *you*. I have been longing to tell you all about it, but could not before. At one time, and often, I thought you would never hear from me again, that I should never get back to dear old England, never more see the sweet little face which flits above my hot pillow every night—indeed, day and night. All through this dreadful time I have seen it so, a gleam in the darkness, hanging over me like an angel. It was your spirit watching—such an anxious, mournful little face, but Mattie's, clear and distinct; sometimes I would put up my thin, weak hand to touch it, it was so vivid and close. I knew how you were praying for me, darling! I *felt* your prayers; they seemed to be sent on to me from heaven, and to help mine to get there. *You* knew I was ill, didn't you, dear? You knew nothing else would have kept me silent to my sweet little gipsy queen for such a time—nothing but death, and I have been very near that. But I mustn't write any more like this; I am better now, thank God—getting stronger every day, and shall soon be up, but not off the sick-list; no, they are going to send me home with invalids directly, and I shall reach Chepslow, I suppose, very soon after this gets to you. I am looking terribly washed out, of course—you would hardly know me—but no doubt the voyage will pull me round a bit. And now to tell you how I got this wound. With all the fighting I had been through since I joined my regiment, I

never got touched till after Lucknow had fallen, when I joined Sir Hope Grant's flying column, which was organised to clear the country of a lot of marauding mutineers, who were looting and devastating everything that came in their way. I had had the honour of being 'mentioned' during the siege, you know, and on the strength of that was made one of Sir Hope's gallopers. Our column's first big scrimmage was against a large force of the rebels near a place called Bhàri, and here I got a slight wound, but a mere scratch compared to that later on, which so nearly polished me off. The scratch was a cut from a tulwar, on the shoulder, delivered by one of the enemy's cavalry—the commandant himself, I found out—a man they called 'the Moolvie,' one of the ringleaders at Lucknow, who was put in irons for sedition before the Mutiny, escaped, and became afterwards our most implacable foe. Their sowars were hard at work trying to cut off our baggage guard, and as I happened to be pounding along to the rear with orders I cannoned against some of them, when I received this slash. I retorted by potting 'the Moolvie' on the spot with my revolver. The heat at the time was frightful, and aggravated the slightest damage done to one's person, so that my shoulder took longer to heal—in fact, it hadn't healed when I got this, a very different matter. It was in a rough-and-tumble skirmish with some fugitives. I had just cut down an infatuated nigger, who wouldn't run away and seemed to wish to be killed; I thought I had obliged him, and rode on, when I felt a hot sting in the small of my back. It was a bullet. The fanatic had picked up a loaded rifle beside him, almost in his death-struggle, and taken a good shot at me as I was riding away. After that I saw no more fighting. It was some time before the surgeons could get out the bullet, which had gone deep and taken a bad course. It was a long, lingering affair. From one week to another

the wound seemed to get no better; then mortification threatened; then I got fever; then the doctors gave me up. But enough of these details; I don't wish to horrify you, my gentle little Mattie; I only want you to know *how* ill I have been, and understand that I could not possibly send you any news before. Oh, how I long to get home! You can't imagine what that longing is to a poor sick soldier far away from all that is dear to him. I can hardly believe that my life has been saved, considering what I have gone through; but I don't know even yet that I am out of the wood. The doctors tell me I must be awfully careful. You see, it's a bad time to send home invalids, as the hot weather has set in, and the winds are blowing across the plains like the breath of Nebuchadnezzar's furnace. But they couldn't get us off before, their hands are so full—such a lot of poor broken-down fellows all going home at the same time, many of them, I fear, never to reach there. I dread the journey across the desert from Suez to Alexandria, but once on the other side I shan't care; only let me scent the salt spray of Biscay's troubled Bay, sight the white cliffs once more of dear old Albion's shore, and new blood will jump into my feeble veins. At any rate, you see the Sepoys haven't knocked quite all the poetry out of my composition.

"Now, little sweetheart, take your map and imagine me on my homeward voyage; follow me from point to point, and when I get to such and such a place I shall think you have just put your finger on it to welcome my safe arrival there. What a lot I've written! At least it seems so. I feel quite an author, as if I had composed a big book. But I must stop now, or my dear friend the doctor (our surgeon-major, who has been so good) will pitch into me for disobedience of orders in over-exerting myself; so I'll only take one more dip, a deep one, into the ink-horn, to

write this thickly and plainly at the end : to tell my loved little Mattie that I am more hers now than ever—that time, distance, excitement, fighting, and suffering, seem only to have drawn me nearer to her. And now, good-bye, keep up your dear heart for a wee time longer, and then——!

"All ever your own, what's left of me,

"ATHOL."

"P.S.—I hope you and the General will get on better when you go back. You know the old saw about holding the candle to the—ahem! I should try that with *him*."

About a fortnight after the arrival of this memorable post, my grandfather received another black-edged letter, and, as I judged from a quick glance at the address, in the same handwriting. He generally left the perusal of his correspondence till after breakfast, but this letter he opened and read before he spiked the usual matutinal egg (which almost constituted his frugal meal), and having read it, observed with a placid smile :

"Ah, now I'm very glad of this. Captain Zollern is coming down again to see us, Mattie. It appears he has postponed leaving England for a time, and so remembers my invitation. That will be nice for you ; he will stir up our stagnation a little, won't he? Um—ar—yes—a very pleasant fellow."

I was not sure that I agreed, and mumbled out something that might mean anything.

As for stirring up our stagnation, I looked forward to *another*, a very different person from Captain Zollern, doing that before long. The only point in favour of this mysterious stranger's return to Gaunchester-Haugh that I could see, was the possible gratification of my gnawing curiosity which his first visit had so excited. I meant to try again to get to the bottom of that.

The first black letter, then, was from Captain Zollern? Of course; a communication obviously of much importance, which my grandfather had kept to himself. I was madly inquisitive—intensely exercised to understand it—to know what the mutual interest could be that had thus suddenly and mystically arisen between this man and the General.

Of course it was no business of mine; at least I supposed not, or my grandfather would have felt bound to tell me. I only wished he were not such a reserved, unfathomable creature, and would recollect that I was no longer an infant, but a young woman of discretion in whom he might safely have confided. To win his confidence, however, I must try to win more of his affection; and to keep that when I had won it, must follow Athol's advice about holding the candle to the old gentleman in his darkest moods. I did not feel that this would be at all easy, notwithstanding the present improvement in his manner, and, consequently, any resolution of mine to carry out such a purpose was rather lukewarm and half-hearted.

CHAPTER VIII.

HOW OUR MYSTERIOUS VISITOR RETURNS, AND WHAT I LEARN FROM HIM

THE following afternoon Captain Zollern arrived. We girls were having five o'clock tea on the lawn, under the paternal protection of an old sycamore, as he drove up to the house. He saw us and lifted his hat with a smile, his white teeth gleaming from under his great black moustache. He got out at the front door and rang the bell himself; then, having paid the flyman and handed his luggage over to the

butler, came towards us. We could not quite make up our minds whether to be glad or otherwise that he had come; certainly he might somewhat relieve the dull monotony of the place, as the General suggested, but for my own part I looked upon the man with distrust, as I have already said —an instinctive feeling of suspicion, almost dislike. I was offended that he had taken part in trying to hoodwink us—that he should have this secret with my grandfather which he refused to let us share. It was foolish of me, no doubt—another instance of inordinate female curiosity.

Nevertheless, as he was the General's guest I was bound to receive him civilly.

"This is a pleasure I hardly expected to be able to give myself," he said, after the usual greetings, and taking a garden-chair beside us, "but unforeseen business detaining me in England, I resolved to put off my departure till the autumn. I then bethought me of your grandfather's kind invitation, and here I am."

Good gracious! Did the man intend to stay with us for the rest of the summer? It sounded rather like it.

I murmured that we were delighted to see him, and asked if he would have a cup of tea, which he declined, but requested permission to light a cigarette instead.

"My meat and drink almost," he observed, puffing the fragrant Turkish tobacco into the leaves over his head. "We foreigners smoke twice as much as your Englishman, I believe, especially these things. Our mercurial natures, perhaps, require more sedatives than the average phlegmatic Briton. Did you ever try a cigarette yourselves?"

What a question! To my surprise, Lola answered, in her quiet, lazy tone—she generally spoke with rather a taking little drawl—that she *had* done such a thing after dusk on the Boulevards.

I saw a twinkle in his eye at the admission, and he actually had the audacity to offer her his chased-silver case.

"Oh, no, not now, thank you—I mean, not here," she said, with a slight laugh.

"Exactly; I understand—*à la bonne heure*," and he replaced it in his pocket. "Your grandfather is out walking, the butler informed me, Miss Freith, so I didn't go indoors with my baggage. It looked deliciously tempting under here. I was drawn to you at once, you see." The latter sentence seemed addressed to Lola. "Do you think I should find him about, if I went to look?" he added, turning to me.

"I don't know, I am sure," I answered, continuing quickly: "Yes, very likely you would, somewhere in those walks."

I hoped he would go, for I did not feel inclined to talk to the man, still less to accompany him. But he made no attempt to move, saying, with a suppressed yawn, that "no doubt the General would appear presently."

He now indulged in a little spasmodic praise of the garden and grounds—of the said walks which he had been through on his former visit.

"Such delightful old goblin haunts," he called them, "but romantic enough to make the most prosaic bachelor fall down and worship at the shrine of Venus—that is, if he got inside there and found a Venus ready to hand, ha, ha, ha! But you have them very much to yourselves, have you not? A creepy spot in the evening, especially for ladies without a male protector—as full of legends, I should say, as the old Thuringian forests."

His remarks appeared to me frivolous, artificial. I did not trouble to respond to them; I left Lola to do so.

"Ah, you were reading, I see," said he suddenly, leaning forward in his chair towards Lola. One of those

abominable French novels lay in her lap, only partially covered by her lace-edged handkerchief. His roving eye detected it. "And who is our author—may I look?" The impertinence! "Pray excuse my curiosity," and he stretched out his hand for the book, so that Lola could not well refuse to give it.

I felt quite sorry for her. But she took it very calmly; more so than I should have done. Well, thank goodness, the novel was not in *my* lap. I only hoped he might not think that she had been reading it aloud to me, or that *I* ever read such things myself—not that I need care for his opinion.

He glanced at the title and the author's name, and apparently knowing the book, began discussing the plot with her, which seemed a *pot bouilli* of murder, suicide, conjugal unfaithfulness, and everything that was ghastly and improper.

While they were engaged in this edifying discourse (for the most part carried on in French), my grandfather came in sight and sauntered towards us. I was glad of the interruption, and rather wondered to myself at Lola's tone of conversation—at her "freedom of speech" with this perfect stranger.

Seeing the General coming, Captain Zollern returned her the book promptly, with a peculiar smile, and rising from his chair went forward to meet him. My grandfather received him cordially. I never remember him so gracious to any one as he was to this man. Such geniality was quite a new departure in his character. And it was not only an outward form of courtesy, for he treated him with generous hospitality, and made Scroils bring up the best brands in his honour from the vast cellars under the dining-room, which cellars, I had heard, held a large stock of choice wines seldom drawn upon.

Before Captain Zollern had been with us a week, I am bound to confess my feelings towards him had undergone a change. The secret of this was that he had overcome my prejudice by taking me at last into his confidence.

It happened on the third day after his return; I was rambling by myself in the shady walks, indulging in a "sulky" after luncheon, when he came upon me.

"Ah, Miss Freith, 'on lonely meditation bent!'" said he, suddenly overtaking me. "I hope I don't disturb you."

I started slightly, then replied with a laugh:

"Oh, not the least; you are the very person I was thinking about" (scarcely the truth unless he and Athol had exchanged identities)—"that is, the very person I wanted to see," I added, correcting myself.

"Indeed! I feel flattered."

"You needn't be," I said, laughing again; "I only want you for what I can get out of you."

"Gra'merci, then I *don't* feel so. What may that be?"

"*You* know; this secret of yours—this mystery between you and my grandfather. Come, I want the truth; you promised to tell me."

"I did."

"You confess I haven't heard it yet?"

"I do; but I have been debating whether you ought to hear it."

"Debating with whom?"

"Myself—questioning whether it would be to your happiness."

"My happiness! Does it concern me, then?

"Well, yes, it does."

"Then certainly I ought to know."

"I am not so sure that you ought. At any rate, if I tell you, will you promise——"

"Never to tell a soul?" I interrupted eagerly. "Of

course I won't, Captain Zollern; I promise you faithfully won't," I added, becoming more and more fervid as my curiosity increased.

"Yes, people always promise faithfully," he replied, in a quietly satirical tone.

"Do you doubt my word, then?" I exclaimed.

"Not at all; but I am not going to bind you too strictly, and tempt you to break it. I know what a pleasure it is for young ladies to exchange secrets, and no doubt you would like to tell Miss La Touche, your confidential friend."

"I don't know that I should; it depends upon what it is."

"I give you leave to confide in *her*, but on no account must you let the General find out that I have told you; he might consider it a great breach of confidence."

"Oh, I should think I won't, indeed," I cried promptly. "The General and I are *not* confidants."

"I suppose not; but—ar—you mustn't think I wish to encourage you to deceive him."

"I don't mean to think anything of the sort; and with all respect for your fatherly feelings, I hope I'm too old to be easily led away——"

"Into doing wrong—of course you are. I'm sure you wouldn't do anything to deceive your grandfather, or act in any manner contrary to his wishes."

I didn't know why, but I believed he meant to be sarcastic, and I felt vexed, not a little conscience-stricken.

"Come, *revenons à nos moutons*, Captain Zollern," said I, bringing him back to the point. "What *is* this wonderful secret which you say concerns me? I'm dying to hear."

"Very well, you shall." He paused provokingly to light a cigarette; having done which rather leisurely, he proceeded:

"You were quite right to doubt. On that first night

I came to this house, it was not to warn the General against any burglar——"

"Of course I knew that."

"What we told you was an equivocation."

"That's quite as bad as a story.—Yes?"

"Not quite, for it *was* to warn him against a dangerous character, but a very different sort of person from a burglar. Whom do you think?"

"How can I possibly guess?"

"I'll tell you, then—*Your own father!*"

"My father!"

"Your father."

"Gracious! I didn't know I had one."

"Nor have you."

"What *do* you mean? Pray go on."

"To begin at the beginning, then; a few years ago I met your father in America. I don't know whether you ever heard his name?"

"No, I've never heard of him at all."

"Waller. I met him at Cincinnati, where he had established a practice as a medical man; a clever fellow he was, too, and getting on well; but he had a failing, a fatal failing, which ruined him in the end: he was a confirmed gambler. Consequently he very soon did for himself in the States, and I had to lend him a helping hand, which I was willing enough to do, for we had cultivated a warm friendship. I persuaded him to go back to England to try his luck once more in the old country. He returned, and I met him afterwards in London from time to time, but soon saw that his chance of recovering himself was hopeless; for in the meanwhile he had contracted another failing, a more fatal one still, drink, which was killing him. Again and again I helped him, for I liked the fellow—in spite of everything I couldn't help liking him—and again and again he

promised to reform, but he never did. In the course of our acquaintance he told me the story of his life, and of his early marriage with your mother, who ran away with him from this house in defiance of her father, and who died two or three years afterwards. He then informed me that General Crutwell was a wealthy old man, who lived down here by himself, with no ties and no one to leave his money to—your father, I suppose, didn't know of you—and that he considered he had a just claim upon him as a son-in-law. He often talked with me of this, and of pressing his claim in face of the General's obstinacy and antipathy against him, but never did so, that I was aware of, no doubt because he felt that it was hopeless. As time went on the demon drink took stronger hold of him, and his excesses at length culminated in a violent attack of delirium tremens, if you understand what that is."

"I'm not sure that I do; but no matter."

"It means raging madness produced by alcohol. He became so bad that I did not know what to do with him. I was sorry for the poor fellow, for there was much good in his nature, and I had not the heart to desert him in the awful state to which he had reduced himself. It was when in this state that a powerful monomania seized him—a crazy determination to come down here to Gaunchester-Haugh to see the General, and force him to do his duty as a father-in-law. His language and threats against the old man were something awful to hear—but really, Miss Freith, I don't like to tell you all this——"

"Yes, yes; I wish to know everything. Please go on."

"It is sad and painful to make such revelations about anybody's father; but you would insist upon hearing the truth, so I must finish what I have to tell. He vowed in the wild fury of his ravings to break into this house (so you see it *was* a would-be house-breaker whom I had to warn your grandfather against), and declared with a solemn and

fearful oath that he would not stop at murder if the General refused his demand for money—if he did not send him away amply provided for for life. I paid small heed to these ravings, but little knew what method there was in the man's madness. I had him watched, and stayed with him a good deal myself in his miserable lodgings in London; but, in spite of all vigilance, I found one day that he had somehow gone out—escaped. I dreaded what might ensue. He was terribly sane on this one subject—this fixed resolve of coming down here to carry out his threat—and, as I knew, had money enough for travelling purposes. I followed him as quickly as possible, feeling sure where he had gone, and traced him to the 'Red Bull' Hotel at Kellingsby, near here. But from the hotel he had disappeared only an hour before I reached it. I prayed that I might not be too late to avert a shocking catastrophe—a terrible crime—for I was sure, from his own description of your grandfather, that the old man would never be coerced into parting with his money, and that violence, probably murder, would follow. I at once hired a horse from the hotel stables, and galloped off here as hard as I could to anticipate his visit, if possible, and warn General Crutwell of his danger. Naturally, your grandfather's first thought was to summon the police, but this I dissuaded him from doing to avoid *esclandre*. I am glad I did so now, for *your* sake. Besides, having arrived in time, I trusted to be able to cope with the situation and quiet my unhappy friend, should he appear. All the same, I was very thankful he did not do so. The rest you know. Where your poor father went to, or what he did after he left the hotel that evening, I never discovered; but on my return to town I repaired straightway to his lodgings, and there, to my astonishment, found him—in the last stage of his disease. Then from the lodging-house keeper I learnt partially what had happened—that some philanthropic gentleman had come across him

wandering about aimlessly in the country (presumably somewhere in this neighbourhood), and seeing his condition, which he described as speechless and out of his mind, took him to his own house, and subsequently finding upon him his card (with address) and return ticket, had despatched him to London in care of a couple of servants, who delivered him safely over to his landlady. The end soon came. I stayed with him till the last; he never recognised me again, but in periodical fits screamed forth his vows of vengeance against the General—vows he had fortunately failed to act upon, and which death mercifully prevented him from again attempting to carry out. Directly he died I wrote to your grandfather to announce the fact—that communication being the first black-edged letter which you mentioned as having seen. Now, Miss Freith, you know the whole story, and sad enough it is. I should never have told you of my own free will; but you pressed me sorely, and in consideration of the promise which I may say you extorted from me (pardon the word) by your perseverance, I have yielded. If I have pained you in the revelation, you must forgive me; for as the witness of a melancholy tragedy I have, I assure you, given my evidence with the very greatest reluctance."

"I have nothing to forgive," I answered, in a low tone, "since I pressed for the information. I thank you for telling me the truth, though it does fill me with shame and pain to know it. You were right indeed in thinking that such knowledge would not make me happy; but the pain has been my own seeking."

"Of one thing you may be assured, Miss Freith," he rejoined earnestly,—"that this sad secret about your father is safe in my keeping—safe as it is with the General."

In reply I murmured again my thanks for the promise given.

A pause followed; then he changed the conversation,

or rather left me to ruminate on what I had heard, while he talked lightly on this and that subject in a way that exacted no answers. Thus, he chatting, I thinking, we returned together to the house.

CHAPTER IX.

"THE LOTUS POOL"

THE mystery was solved, and I had learnt more about my parentage on the one side than I had ever learnt before. In my heart I think I was sorry now that I *had* learnt it. Ignorance in such a case were surely more blissful than wisdom. It much occupied my thoughts, and made me wish now to ascertain more concerning my poor mother.

Notwithstanding Captain Zollern's leave to do so, I did not confide what I had heard to Lola. I thought such a sad story of one's own father ought to be sacred, and mentally agreed with the General that it should be kept undivulged. But Lola, I discovered, soon knew all about it from my informant himself, who thought that I must certainly have told her, so was at no pains to keep up further reserve. No doubt she pressed him, being as curious as I was on the matter.

As I have said, my prejudice against our visitor had sunk before the important information he had given me, and though I had never even seen my father, and all I knew of him was from this unflattering picture, I could not help a feeling of gratitude to the man who had so befriended him in adversity. Moreover, as the General had declared, we were greatly indebted to this disinterested stranger for the prompt action he had taken for our protection from a dangerous maniac. That such protection proved unnecessary was a mere accident, due to the intervention of

Providence; I shuddered to think what an escape my grandfather had had—perhaps ourselves as well.

I was now more favourably disposed towards Captain Zollern, and endeavoured to like him, but as time went on, and he continued to stay under the same roof with us, my harmonious inclinations were put to severe test. Many little things occurred to upset my would-be friendship for the man, and rouse my suspicions as to his true character. One incident I must mention in particular, which happened a few days subsequent to his confidential talk with me.

It was on one very hot afternoon, such as Longfellow describes—

> An afternoon in summer;
> Very hot and still the air was,
> Very smooth the gliding river,
> Motionless the sleeping shadows:
> Insects glistened in the sunshine,
> Insects skated on the water,
> Filled the drowsy air with buzzing,
> With a far-resounding war-cry.

An afternoon, in fact, when—to descend from the sublime to the ridiculous—a person actually "feels inclined to strip off his flesh and sit in his bones."

Now, a beautiful brook ran into the Furion a short distance below the Gaunchester meadows—a clear, sparkling stream which, with dubious course, meandered gently through the cool, deep woodlands, here watering a romantic glade, there pausing in a miniature salmon-pool, anon tumbling and gurgling over green-slimed rocks, through beds of bracken, or burying itself beneath thickets of hawthorn and nut-bushes. It was a great favourite of mine, this little stream, and many an hour had I spent upon its bright green banks, plucking and arranging large handfuls of wild

flowers or reading some book of poems. One particular pool in a secluded nook I knew of and told Lola about as a luxurious place for a bathe. In hot weather I had taken an occasional sly dip there by myself, when I was at home before. This boiling day, on which the primary consideration was to keep one's self cool, reminded me of those refreshing dips, and brought forth my tempting suggestion to Lola. She accepted it eagerly.

"Oh, my dear Mattie, by all means let us go!" She was lying panting on the sofa in my room, in a state of *dégagé* limpness. "I'm nearly suffocated. I've been yearning all day for a plunge in the sea, and a long swim."

"Ah, *you* can swim, Loir; I wish I could. But I'm afraid you won't have much room for that in my little bathing-place."

"Never mind, we can splash about and get cool; that's something. When shall we go?"

"Now, I vote; it's no use waiting till the sun is lower, or we should have to hurry so to get back in time to dress for dinner. How far is it?"

"You see those three large oaks together?" I pointed them out to her from the window. "It's just on the other side, not very far, but so beautifully hidden and private; we're not the least likely to be disturbed."

"Delightful! why didn't you think of it before? I'll be ready in five minutes," and she went to her room.

Before the five minutes were over, I had looked out my bathing-dress—a pretty costume in blue and white, which I used to wear at school—put on my hat, and joined her.

Then we started, carrying our towels and things in the small compass of a couple of reticules, which might mean anything. To avoid seeing the others, and the answering of possible questions, we left the house by a side entrance, and slipped through the walks at the back. Once out of

the eyes of the windows, we quickened our steps, but were not destined to get away unnoticed after all, for at one of the turnings we came upon Captain Zollern enjoying a cigarette in the pleasant shade, and strolling languidly along the path.

"Good gracious, ladies, where *are* you off to at such a pace?" he inquired, glancing at our bags; "this grilling day, too, when I've hardly energy enough to crawl!"

"We're going to get some wild flowers for the house to help old Nathan's scanty supply," replied Lola, with her usual calm; "a sudden inspiration seized us, and we determined to shake off our laziness."

"Really, does you great credit, I'm sure—wish *I* could," and he yawned. Of course I coloured up like a little stupid; I saw him looking at me, and to hide my blushes chimed in with brazen self-possession:

"Yes, and there are such heaps of beautiful ferns over in that part of the woods," pointing in a direction exactly opposite to my pool. "Will you come and help us, Captain Zollern?" I devoutly hoped he wouldn't.

"Well, thank you, I should like it immensely" (Oh, what a bore!); "but I have several letters to write before post" (Thank goodness!), "so I think you must excuse me."

"Very well, then, *au revoir* till dinner-time," said Lola, and we walked on at a more dignified pace, he raising his hat and showing his teeth, and continuing his crawl towards the house.

Though the day was so warm, the way was sweet and for the most part shady; cool underfoot in the rich grass of the meadows which we skirted. We made a certain tall tree our steeplechase point, and went straight across country towards it. The lark was soaring high above the palpitating atmosphere and twittering blithely to us as we sped along, to him two specks upon the earth, himself invisible in the

heavens. The glare was too fierce for us to gaze upward, and though we could hear we could not see him. From tree to tree the cuckoos answered each other in their monotonous tones, varied occasionally by a false croak, as though their throats had become parched from the heat. The meadows were gorgeous; a blaze of purple, gold, and silver — clover, buttercups, dandelions, and field-daisies overpowering the emerald green of the grass. Along the hedgerows stood solitary foxgloves at intervals, like sentries; further on a cluster of them, a "company;" further still, a thick phalanx, the main body of the regiment. Soon we plunge into the deep shade of the quiet twilight woods, entering another world of sweet scents, sweet sights, sweet sounds; fragrant briar and honeysuckle greet us on every hand; dense arcades of foliage protect us from the scorching sun; soft cooings of stock-dove and wood-pigeon enhance the sacred stillness, like subdued murmurings in a vast cathedral.

"Oh, Mattie," Lola cried, throwing herself down under a tree and fanning her face with her straw hat, "how heavenly these English woods are! There is nothing like them out of the little island."

"I think not," I said, with a proud air of proprietorship, not that the thought entered my head then that some day the woods we were now enjoying might all be mine. I answered only with the pride of an Englishwoman for the fair country of her birth.

I had loved these leafy solitudes in my childhood; they were my special haunts outside the grounds. In their dim shades, beneath the dense, dark green, I felt so far away from the weary, troublesome world, far from the petty turbulence of my own little life. Here there was such sweet rest in the long summer days, such a deep peace brooding over all. Here I could imagine the happiness of our first parents

when they walked in Paradise together, their souls pure as the garden around them, new and fresh from the Creator's hand. No one can more thoroughly enjoy Nature than a child, and no child enjoyed it more than I, situated as I was at home. To the young who look on the beauties of God's earth with unjaded eyes, their simplicity of mind makes such delights all-sufficient for them without any of the excitement of human passions, without a restless yearning after those things they know not of, which as yet are far beyond their small philosophy, but soon enough to enter it. The almost untrodden recesses of these old woods, so primæval in their sanctity, were ever peculiar for their silence ; yet they were no birdless groves, like those in the Duke of Richmond's park at Goodwood ; but where the song of the thrush and robin seemed more subdued and infrequent than in other parts, to the rapture of the nightingale, who made these sylvan depths his home, there was no limit—with all his little soul and strength he warbled the livelong night to his mistress and the softly babbling brook which crept beneath him on its way to join the river. We could hear that little brown bird very plainly from the house, and often I used to sit at my bedroom window and listen to his deathless song, and wish myself out there with him in the moonlit glades beside my little silver sweetheart, the woodland stream. Wherever I may be, wherever I may go, I shall always love and remember this restful spot, with its cooing doves, its trilling nightingales, and sweetly murmuring waters.

While we were thus resting—indulging in a brief *dolce far niente* before continuing our walk—the woodpecker's startled cry suddenly rang through the colonnades of trees, and made me exclaim, as I got up :

"There ! that means rain." I was very weather-wise, full of signs and saws on matters meteorological. "Our

woods and landscapes may be delightful," I added, "but our climate is vile, as capricious and uncertain as"—I was going to say my grandfather, but substituted—"as the temper of a gouty old gentleman. Come, Loir, you lazy thing, don't let's forget what we came for. Perhaps we mayn't get another chance for a long time if it sets in wet." At which reminder she also rose.

Presently we came across my little brook in one of its eccentric doubles; then left its side to meet it again further on when it had made up its mind to go more consistently in one direction. From here we followed it in its alternate windings through grove and glade, where its banks were daintily adorned with forget-me-nots and beds of fragrant meadow-sweet, which looked like foam along its borders, and many a golden flower (the river is a great sun-worshipper) yellow milfoil, marigolds, irises, and in the wider and deeper places the sleeping yellow lily.

And now at last we come to the delightful, sequestered spot where lies my pool—"the Lotus Pool" I call it, from the garland of gold which decks its rim. It is, as I promised Lola, private enough—hemmed in jealously by trees and a thick under-growth of ferns and long grasses, whilst trending to the water's edge is a gentle slope of velvet turf on either side. It looks so glassy, cool, and refreshing; a ray of sunlight glints through the tops of the trees and falls on its surface, making it sparkle as though in a smile of welcome, pierces its transparent depths, and sheds a yellow gleam upon the soft sandy bottom.

"Oh, happy thought of yours, Mattie!" exclaimed Lola, gazing lovingly upon the tempting, delicious water. "This is indeed a luxury on such a day. I only wish it were deeper; but that wouldn't suit *you*."

"Not quite; but you must teach me to swim this lovely weather, instead of furbishing up my Italian and Spanish."

"You shall have your first lesson to-day;" and she sat down upon the smooth grass, and began to take off her shoes and stockings—an example I follow.

I don't take long to dress and undress, and had soon transferred myself from my holland gown to the aforesaid blue-and-white costume. Lola was always slower; before she had half her things off, I was on the brink of the pool, ready to make my plunge—like that of most non-swimmers, rather a clumsy, inartistic performance. Souse! in I go, head well under, my long black hair done up in a tight knot on the crown, after the fashion of Chinese women.

I flounder about like a porpoise, and squeal with delight like a pig. Having enjoyed myself thus to the top of my bent for the space of three minutes, I rise to the perpendicular, the water reaching nearly to my bosom.

By this time Lola has also got into her bathing things, and is now standing on the sloping bank, laughing at my antics.

"Quick, come along, dear!" I cry, "it's so utterly delicious. I believe I could stop in till sunset. What are you hesitating for?"

"I was thinking," replies Lola, reflectively.

"Thinking of what?"

"How heavenly a dip would be without all this on!" she answers, with a quiet laugh. "Bathing dresses are very well at *les eaux*, Dieppe, or Trouville, but here surely one might revel in the glory of swimming unencumbered; and since we *are* so private and safe in this little nook, why shouldn't I——?"

"Oh, for goodness' sake, don't dream of such a thing," I remonstrate quickly; "only fancy if any one did come!"

"Very well, then, I won't; perhaps I'd better not," she answers. "It's deep enough for a header, I see."

She hovers for a few seconds longer at the edge of the

pellucid water, as though enamoured, like Narcissus, with the reflection of her own lovely form.

What a picture she looks as she stands there in graceful, half-playful attitude; an amorous stream of sunshine kissing her marble skin and exquisitely moulded limbs, and giving a glorious sheen to the beautiful hair which falls in rippling luxuriance down her back, and reaches far below the level of her knees! Presently, she plunges in with an arrowy dive, shooting horizontally beneath the surface, hands and feet motionless, until her head rises again above the water.

How I envied her her easy movements, as I always did when we bathed at school together—the long, sweeping stroke with which she circled round the pool! There was little compass for a swimmer, but just enough to show off her grace and skill. I tried to imitate her with as much success as a cow might a deer, and got a mouthful of water to check my ardour.

"Oh, I wish I could do it like you, Lola," I spluttered.

"I'll show you presently, dear; let me have one more header."

Again she got out upon the bank, and poised herself for a second dive.

I was standing on one side in the water, watching to see how she took her plunge, when my eye suddenly fell beyond her on the background of thick foliage.

I gave a startled exclamation, which was followed by a splash, and the next instant Lola was in the pool again beside me.

"What's the matter?" she cried. My tone and look of alarm were warning enough.

"There *is* some one!" I whispered.

"Good gracious! where?"

"I saw a face through those trees."

"No, Mattie! did you?"

"Yes, a man. I'm nearly sure—at least, I—I think so."

"Oh, do look again, dear."

I had bobbed down instinctively in the water, and now rose cautiously and peeped. The face, if there had been one, had disappeared. I did not like to say as much at first, but that face I thought I had seen, I also thought I had recognised. It was Captain Zollern's! But how could it have been he? We left him going into the house to write his letters. It *must* have been my imagination. At any rate, it had now vanished.

"It's not there now—it's gone," I said, in a tone of relief.

"Oh, but are you positive there was any one? Mightn't you have been mistaken?"

"Well, really I don't know, dear," I hesitated, trying to encourage a feeling of doubt for my own comfort, and impart the same to Lola for hers. "Perhaps I was—very likely I was."

"Oh, I hope so."

"One does fancy such things; however, I'll make sure. I'll just take a look round," I exclaimed.

"Dare you? I wish you would, Mattie."

Thereupon I rose, got out of the pool, and made straight to the point where I thought I had seen the face. It was the companionship, and wish to reassure Lola, that made me so bold, I fancy; had I been by myself I should have probably stopped shivering in the water for ever so much longer. In any case, the suspicion having arisen, it was not a very pleasant one, for dressed though we were in our pretty French costumes, we couldn't possibly change, of course, with a suspicion of anybody lurking near, unseen but seeing. I wished now that we had not come.

I explored all round the spot in my wet garments, but could see nothing. As I grew still bolder I peered and searched most determinedly; but no, there was no one, nor could I hear the least sound of any retreating footstep. I began to think I must really have been mistaken, and earnestly hoped I had been. I went back to Lola and reported the result of my search, adding that "I believed it was nothing but my fancy after all."

"Oh, my dear child, how silly of you to frighten one so," she cried; "I thought we were caught. Thank heaven, then!" and she darted off for another swim round and round the pool to relieve her feelings.

A few minutes afterwards we were busy with our towels, each helping the other; then dressed ourselves as quickly as possible, and started on our return walk.

We were congratulating ourselves with a renewed feeling of confidence, and laughing at our recent fright from what we believed now to have been a false alarm, when just as we were coming out of the woods my sharp eyes caught sight of a figure some distance on ahead, the figure of a man walking hastily along under cover of a hedge. He was making straight towards our house. I recognised him directly. It was Captain Zollern!

In that moment a revulsion of feeling set in, a burning sensation rushed through me from the tips of my fingers to the roots of my hair. Could he have been there after all? Could it have been his face I had seen peeping at us like a crouching beast of prey? This sudden glimpse of him in front changed my confidence back again to doubt, doubt to suspicion, suspicion almost to conviction. Yes, he must have been there—he *had* been there! I felt nearly certain of it now. He must have followed us—have sneaked after us, contemptible cad that he was! I believe I could have stabbed him at that moment. Lola had also caught sight

of the man in front, I noticed, and I now told her of my revived suspicion. At first she seemed to share it, but afterwards preferring to accept the benefit of the doubt as to whether I had really seen any face peering at us or not, smiled in her quiet way and said she thought it highly improbable, and felt quite sure that no gentleman would be guilty of such an outrage. I did not argue the point; I thought it better to say nothing further, and to allow her to continue in that conviction. Indeed, I tried hard to think as she did, but I could not; and from that hour my first feelings of distrust and dislike of this man came back upon me with tenfold force. I longed for him to bring his visit to an end and leave the house. Little dreamt I how far off was that consummation so devoutly wished; that each day rendered it more remote, and strengthened the footing he had gained at Gaunchester-Haugh.

CHAPTER X.

OUTSIDE THE ENEMY'S CASTLE

One morning, shortly after our visit to "the Lotus Pool," my grandfather pulled me up rather suddenly with the following question:

"Mattie, what has come between you and Captain Zollern lately? What's the matter, child, eh?"

He asked me in a shrewd, rather anxious manner.

"How do you mean, grandpapa?"

"Well, I notice you are barely civil to the man, and seem to avoid his society all at once. What has he done to offend you?"

"Nothing particular," I answered evasively. "I didn't know I had been uncivil——"

"Nonsense, you know it well enough. Do you suppose I'm blind? You certainly are the most capricious young lady I ever saw, and seem to delight in giving yourself airs. Only the other day you couldn't be gracious enough to Captain Zollern, and now you scarcely condescend to answer him when he speaks to you."

An explanation was out of the question. I saw I had made a mistake in not cloaking my feelings, if I wished to keep my own counsel about that bathing episode as I intended. I repeated my lame protest.

"Well, whether such downright rudeness—for I can call it nothing else—arises from ignorance or caprice, I will thank you to be more careful," returned my grandfather, in his usual setting-down tone. "I desire you will treat my guest in my house with proper courtesy, as befits a young girl in your position." I remained silent. "You understand me, Mattie?"

"Yes, grandpapa."

"I am disappointed in you, child; I hoped—that is, I thought—you had found his companionship agreeable and congenial to your tastes; that the regard and admiration which I have some reason to believe you have inspired in him had awakened a reciprocal feeling—in short—ar——" He hesitated and paused, as if waiting for me to say something.

Did I understand him aright? Was it possible that my grandfather was coming out in a new character—as a matchmaker? Surely not; yet what else could he mean?

"But perhaps it *is* so," he went on, as I still preserved a silence. "Perhaps this is a little finessing of yours to hide your true feelings. I know what adepts girls are at the rubber of love."

Good gracious, he did mean it! I *was* astonished.

"Answer me, Mattie. Don't you like Captain Zollern?"

"Like him, grandpapa?"

"Yes, like him—like him well enough for a husband—that's what I'm trying to arrive at," blurted out the old man irritably. "I mean, of course, after you have had a little more time to consider the matter." I was about to reply, when he continued: "Don't interrupt, my dear, but listen to me for a moment. I know something of the world and the men in it, and I can tell you this—that I never yet met one who made so speedy and favourable an impression upon me as this young man has done. I may say I have formed a very high opinion of him, and—and if—if he were to——"

"But, my dear grandpapa," I said quickly and deferentially, as he halted again, "even if I did like Captain Zollern ever so much, he is surely old enough to be my father."

"Stuff and nonsense! Certainly not more than thirty; but what if he were? Far better for a girl of your nature to choose a man of mature sense and years, than a brainless young booby who would break your heart, perhaps your head, and toss you aside, as a child does an old doll, before you had been married to him a year."

I saw how it was now; my grandfather knew I had not forgotten Athol—how he knew it I couldn't say, intuitively perhaps—and had heard that he (my Highland laddie) would shortly be upon the scene again, so feared a rebreaking out of the old war-game, with all its strategic manœuvres—General Cupid commanding the defending force, General Crutwell the attacking, and rather overmatched. Doubtless he considered anything would be preferable to that—anything sooner than I should "take up" again with the son of his cherished foe; to prevent

which he was desirous of handing me over with all expedition to this Captain Zollern instead. I was very much obliged to him.

"Excuse me, grandfather," I said again, in my most respectful manner, "but you are quite under a delusion. I am sure neither Captain Zollern nor I have entertained for an instant such an idea as you seem to suppose. *I* certainly could not do so, therefore please don't let us speak of it any more."

"Oh, indeed, you would rather not speak of it any more? You wish to dismiss the subject—exactly, I understand—especially just at this juncture. Now, I tell you what it is, Miss Mattie Freith"—my grandfather's suppressed wrath crescendoed into an angry roar—"you will do as I desire, as I think best for you in this matter, or by the heaven above, you shall repent it! And if this man condescends to ask you to be his wife, refuse him at your peril!—That'll do!"

I answered nothing; it was useless to argue with the old iron General when he was in this mood. Nor did he permit me to say more, for with that last impressive speech he closed the interview.

Now, when we have been induced to take an anxious interest in the unexpected and phenomenal reformation of a very bad character, or in some person who has lately risen in our estimation by an abnormal change of disposition and behaviour, it is with a genuine pang of regret that we behold that person suddenly remove the drag from his moral coach, and go downhill again harder than ever; and I was very sorry to find my grandfather thus reverting to his former self with such startling abruptness, just when I had begun to think better things of him. It was disappointing to say the least of it; if he was disappointed in me, I was in him. However, I felt tolerably safe from the necessity

of disobeying him in this, and thereby incurring the terrible consequences, whatever they might be. I did not think Captain Zollern was the least likely to propose to me, even if I gave him the opportunity. It scarcely needed my woman's instinct—vastly superior to my grandfather's in such a case—to see that this Hungarian gentleman was smitten with Lola, if with any one, and that he only paid me a certain modicum of attention, out of respect to his host. I certainly didn't think he was in love with her—the noble passion, I suspected, was quite out of his line; he was simply amusing himself with a handsome girl, indulging in a mild flirtation *pour passer le temps*.

After this little "dust up" with the General, I thought it advisable to change my manners, and allowed discretion to thaw my outer coating of ice when in presence of his guest. The result was a relapse into pleasantness on the part of my despotic relative.

But ere another three days had passed, he, Lola, and Captain Zollern had all sunk into insignificance in my mind, for on the third day—a sweet red-letter day to me, yet full of sadness—Athol Kelso came back to his home.

The return of the wounded soldier, fresh from the horrible scenes of the Indian Mutiny, about which so much had been written and read in England, was a stirring event in our quiet locality; everybody knew of it directly, many beforehand, but my joy on receiving the glad tidings was roughly trodden down by grief, when I also heard that he had become much worse upon the voyage, and had arrived at Chepslow only just alive.

I cannot attempt to describe my agony of mind, the acute suspense I suffered, to know that he was within a few hundred yards of me once more, lying ill in that old red house across the river, perhaps dying at that very minute, and I utterly unable to see him or do anything for him. It

was torture—excruciating, intolerable torture; no woman could bear it; *I* could not. I put all fear of consequences behind me, and in the dusk of the evening after dinner stole over to the Rectory. What did I mean to do? I had no idea. I only felt that I must and would see my poor darling. Remember, I loved, not with a sudden burning passion, but a long-standing, well-tried love. The dear object of that love was within my reach, dying—is it to be wondered, then, that I was prepared to take any step to get to him?

I say I stole up to the Rectory in the gloaming, and for the first time in my life stood within the parsonage grounds, within a few yards of the forbidden house which I had so often longed to enter for his sake. It was now nearly dark, and lights were burning inside. I walked slowly up and down the lawn in front with my eyes fixed upon the picturesque old building, covered, like ours, with ivy, and wondered which was the window of Athol's room. It would be something even to know that. Our positions were now reversed from a former occasion. In my desperate anxiety I conceived the thought of trying to bribe one of the servants, if I could only come across one of them about, to smuggle me indoors, to hide me somewhere till I might safely steal one glimpse of my poor sick boy, and then depart. Better only that than not to see him at all. Even while I was planning this, somebody appeared—a man, and, as I argued from his coming round from the offices, one of the men-servants. Ah, he had a dog with him! To my consternation, it came running towards me, barking furiously. But it was only a barker; it stopped before it reached me.

"Pouncer! Pouncer! Come here! What's the matter, Pouncer?"

Good gracious! It was Mr. Kelso's voice. I was in

for it now. I must deal with the old man himself, then. I stepped forward to meet him, not without uncomfortable misgivings. I felt such a sneak, such a thief in the night.

"Who is that?" he asked, as I drew near. "Is that you, Martha?"

Why, he knew me—called me by my name! But, no—he mistook me for one of his servants, a namesake, seemingly.

"It's I, Mr. Kelso," I replied.

"Who? I canna see ye."

"Mattie Freith," and I stammered forth some incoherent apology.

"Why, what's the matter? Have ye lost your road, or what?"

He evidently did not understand my apology, and could not take in the fact that I was there by design.

"No, I—I came on purpose. Indeed, I couldn't help it—I could not stay away."

"Well, upon my word, this is a strange proceeding! And does your grandfather know ye've come?"

"I'm afraid he doesn't."

"And have you no respect for his wishes, that ye act like this? I'm astonished at ye, Miss Freith."

"Oh, Mr. Kelso, have pity on me," I pleaded, with a choking sob. "I am so unhappy—so dreadfully anxious. I only wanted to—to ask about him."

"My son is vary ill, vary ill indeed." His voice trembled.

"Oh, heavens!" I cried, in the greatest distress. "Is he in danger? Oh, tell me, is he in danger?"

"He is in God's hands; we must bide and pray."

"Oh, Mr. Kelso, may I see him? Only for one single moment!" I implored.

"Nay, ye must not ask me that. I canna let ye."

"But I love him—I love him so—my heart is breaking."

"I am vary sorry for you, my poor girl—vary sorry." He laid his hand upon my shoulder, and spoke gently and compassionately. I gathered hope for a moment from his tone.

"I'll be so quiet—I will not excite him," I pleaded on: "and when I go back, I will tell my grandfather that I have been; I'm sure he will forgive me."

"Do not press it, my child; it pains me to refuse you, but ye ask me what I canna grant. Ye know how matters stand; I am no hard man, but it's—it's joost impossible."

My heart sank again, I could say no more. Kindly as he spoke, I saw now that he was firm. My grief overwhelmed me. I sank down on the lawn at his feet, weeping softly, silently to myself. He thought I was praying; I was; trying to lift my heart to God from under its weight of woe. As I raised my eyes, I saw the old clergyman standing reverently beside me, his head bowed, hands clasped; he too was in prayer.

Presently, I rose with a calmer feeling at my breast—of relief, and hope that my thoughts had reached heaven. I stood gazing up into the starry space above us, as though searching for my answer there.

"Mattie!"

The familiar name called me back. Mr. Kelso had uttered it.

I heard him with surprise, and waited to hear more.

"Ye'll excuse me," he said, "I called ye that, but——"

"Do call me so."

"Vary weel. I have to ask ye this, Mattie. You have no changed to my poor boy, I see, but how do ye know he still thinks of you? It's two years since ye parted—since

the night he went up to your house, as you have come here this evening. We will say no more of that—but, tell me, have ye been writing to each other all this time?"

"Yes, we have," I murmured.

"That was wrong—deceit and disobedience in ye both, and ye knew it could come to nothing but unhappiness!"

"Forgive me, but can others rule our hearts? Is it wrong to cherish a true, holy love that God has put there, and——?"

"That's not the right view of it. Ye're looking at it in a mistaken light altogether. It canna be but wrong to go through your young lives acting a lie, even though it be for love. The fifth law bids ye honour your father. In that General Crutwell stands to you as I to Athol; and have ye honoured us by this long practice of deceit, this defiance of our wishes and commands? Ye canna excuse yourselves on the plea of your affections. The fir-rst duty of a child, as of a soldier, is obedience, and therefore I say, in disobeying us, ye have done wrong, vary wrong."

"Yes, in that I fear we have; but surely not in loving. Yet is there no excuse for us? We have been driven from a straight course by this unhappy feud between yourself and my grandfather, which is no fault of ours, and—and which I cannot understand. Please make allowances for us, Mr. Kelso."

"I do make allowances. I tell ye I am not a hard man, and I do not wish to judge ye too sharply. I see ye are in earnest, and I say again, I am sorry for ye."

"Indeed, indeed you may be. You cannot think what I suffer, or how hopeless I feel."

"But what can I do, Mattie? Ye canna expect me to conspire with ye against your ain grandfather, even if I felt ever so disposed to look at matters in a deefferent light myself, which, mind ye, I don't admit."

"Oh, yes, I believe you would—I believe *you* would unbend and break down this barrier to our happiness if only that my grandfather would meet you halfway."

"Nay, I canna give ye leave to think that. Do not lay such thought to your heart. As you say, ye don't understand the cause of this sad quarrel between us, and I hardly think ye ever will. It may be as well that ye never do." The latter sentence was uttered *sotto voce*, but I overheard it, and asked quickly:

"Why not, Mr. Kelso? Why would it not be well for me to know?"

"Niver mind, my dear; to explain that would be to tell ye out at once, and it will no benefit ye to hear. It's a matter entirely between your grandfather and myself—a matter, I'm afraid, that will stand between us to our graves. Enough of this. We were speaking of my boy. You wish to see him, but it wouldna mak' ye happier, Mattie, if ye did, for he would not recognise ye."

"Oh, is he so ill—is he unconscious?"

"He is."

"Ah! in danger, I know. Oh, only to see him—only to see him for one minute!" I moaned piteously. "It would not make me happier in one way, true, but it would be a comfort to rest my eyes upon his dear face once more, for, oh, Mr. Kelso, I—I know what you dread—your manner frightens me! I do beseech you, grant me this—on my knees I beg for this!" I watched his face anxiously, whilst he hesitated for a few moments. I saw that one side of his nature, the better, was struggling with the other side. At length he answered:

"Ah, well then, Mattie, I will. I *will* give ye that little comfort. I have no heart to refuse ye any longer, my poor girl; but, mind, it must be with your grandfather's permission. Go back and ask him; and I only

grant it with an aching heart, because I feel that something worse than feuds and quarrels may come too soon to part ye. Go, my dear."

With a gulp of deep emotion, he pressed my hand and turned away.

I had no words to thank him, nor could I utter one; my heart was bursting. It was a relief to hasten from the spot—to run with flying feet back to my home on this errand—alas! a fruitless one, I feared—a forlorn hope, to think to move the General from his granite will, even at this mournful moment. But I would try!

CHAPTER XI.

HOW LOVE CREEPS IN THROUGH THE PORTCULLIS

I REACHED home in a panting state, never having stopped running since I left the Rectory lawn. I had not the least considered what I should say to my grandfather, or how frame my beseeching request. Thoughts swarmed confusedly in the cells of my brain, like disturbed bees in a hive. I had no power over them. I could not think calmly. Yet, knowing that I must collect myself before I went into the General's presence, I halted as I drew near the house, and took breath.

I looked in through the window of his study, where a lamp was burning, and saw him reading as usual, his stern face frowning down at the volume before him. In a few minutes that face would be frowning upon me. I knew that too well.

Whilst I gazed at him my thoughts became less chaotic,

and I began to reflect that to ask what I had to ask was only to be refused. Why, then, should I ask it? Was it of any use? Was it wise to do so, and stir up his anger to no purpose? I was pondering the question thus when Lola and Captain Zollern appeared, coming out on the lawn by a side-path through the shrubberies. I saw them first; they were too earnestly engaged in conversation, it seemed, to notice me until they were close to where I stood—when Lola exclaimed:

"Oh, there you are, Mattie! Why, where have you been since dinner, dear? The General was looking for you about the grounds for some time. He asked me if I knew where you were, but I couldn't tell him."

Then he had missed me! He suspected already.

"I have been for a stroll down to the river," I answered casually. "But perhaps I had better go indoors now and report myself, if he is anxious to know." Saying which, I left them, and entered the house.

"Come in!" I opened the door of the study, and was with my grandfather.

He continued reading after I had gone into the room, finished the paragraph, and then looked up.

"Oh!—Where have you been, Mattie?"

"Down to the river, grandpapa, and—over on the other side."

"On the other side?"

"Yes, into the Rectory grounds."

"I thought so."

He did not flare up, but spoke in a quiet, matter-of-fact tone. There was a significant pause.

"Do you know he is dying, grandpapa?" I faltered, with quivering lips.

"Who?"

"Athol—Athol Kelso. I have seen his father, and he—he told me." I fell into a chair, sobbing.

"And you have seen *him!* You have been in that house!"

"No, I have not. I went to—to look for somebody—anybody—to ask how he was, and—and Mr. Kelso found me."

"You had no right to go there at all. You knew that, I believe?"

I only sobbed in reply.

The General did not speak again for more than a minute. He took up from the table beside him his gold snuff-box and tapped it mechanically on his knee several times, then without opening it put it down again. I went on sobbing bitterly. At length he rose from his chair and walked about the room. That was a bad sign. But I was prepared for the worst.

"And what did Mr. Kelso say to you?" he inquired presently.

"He told me Ath—his son was unconscious, and that he—he did not think he could live"—the words came with a great gulp—"that *he* would allow me to go in and see him if only you consented to my doing so. I have come to ask you. Oh, grandpapa, pray—pray say yes. At such a solemn moment as this, in the issue of life and death, I beseech you, do not refuse."

He appeared to struggle with himself for a few seconds, then replied, though not so sternly as I expected:

"No—I cannot! Not even to save the young man's life would I consent to your entering that house."

"Oh, grandpapa!"

"That will do, Mattie. You have heard me. Good night to you."

I was dumb. My heart felt suddenly turned to a block of ice. I rose and reeled across the room with dazed, unseeing eyes. I knew that he would say no, but there

was just a hope. Now I felt crushed, yet at the same time hardened, by his cruelty. I left the room scarce knowing what I did, and went out again into the garden. It was now much darker; there was no moon yet, and the sky had clouded over. It began to rain, but I hardly noticed it. I paced up and down the gravel walks for several minutes trying to think what I should do. My grandfather having refused my request, as I dreaded, I thought I ought at all events to go back to the Rectory and tell Mr. Kelso so, as he would be looking for my return. Accordingly I went, but without the least hope of being allowed to see Athol in face of that refusal.

On reaching the door of the parsonage I waited for a minute or two, then knocked gently in preference to ringing. I fancied Mr. Kelso would be listening for my return, and I was right; he appeared almost immediately in answer to my nervous little tap.

"Ah, I thought it was you," he said as he opened the door; "then ye've succeeded?"

"No, indeed I have not."

"What! Ech, but I made sure ye had by your returning."

"No, I only came back to tell you."

"Well, come in, come in, my dear! It's pouring, and you're wet through."

"I—I'm afraid I mustn't—I must go home again now."

"Nonsense, nonsense! What! in all this rain? Absurd!" It was coming down now, a perfect deluge. "You must wait till it's over, of course. I'll no let ye go home in this. It's a regular thunder-pelter. There, come in, Mattie."

"I really dare not, Mr. Kelso; my grandfather would be so angry——"

"Ech, but that's carrying matters a little too far. He

wouldna wish ye to catch your death o' cold, *I'm* sure," and without more ado he pulled me inside the house.

It was done now! As the front door closed, and I found myself within the parsonage walls, I knew that I had taken the step irrevocable, had disobeyed my grandfather to the last letter, and must now bide the consequences.

Mr. Kelso showed me into a small side-room leading out of the entrance-hall, where he left me alone for a minute, insisting on taking my wet cloak and hat himself to the kitchen to be dried. It was an ante-room with folding doors (now closed), which opened, I presumed, either into the dining or drawing-room. While alone for the brief interval I heard a low voice on the other side of the doors, and a murmuring sound as of some one complaining. I concluded it was the clergyman consulting with his invalid wife and asking her to receive me in there. But while the suppressed talking was still going on he came back into the ante-room.

"Please sit down, Miss Freith," he said—"ech, but I may as well keep to the Mattie, since we've dropped into it—the storm will be over soon, I think."

I hoped it wouldn't. Now that I was in the house, under the same roof with Athol, I felt a strong wish to linger there.

"And what did the General say? D'ye mind telling me?"

"He declined in three words, Mr. Kelso. But he says least when he means most. I could not press him, I knew it would be useless."

"And did you mention that I had yielded under the circumstances?"

"I did, but I was scarcely able to speak; he might not have understood me. I told him you thought that your poor son was in great danger, and that was why you had consented." As I said this I recalled my grandfather's

bitter words—that not even to save Athol's life would he allow me to see him or enter this house; and remembering those words, I exclaimed passionately: "Oh, yes, Mr. Kelso, he did understand! My grandfather is very, very hard—cruel, and heartless."

"Nay, nay, Mattie, my girl, you mustn't speak so. Dinna ye forget your duty and the respect due to his old age."

"Oh, I cannot help it. He thrusts me from him by this harshness. How can I respect him when he so little regards my feelings?"

"Hush, my dear, hush!"

I had raised my voice, forgetful that other people in the house might hear me. At that moment a sound thrilled me to the soul—a voice from the other side of the folding doors—an eager, plaintive cry.

"Mattie, Mattie! Oh, it *is* Mattie! Oh, come to me, Mattie—come to me!"

I started up from my chair, trembling.

"Ah, that's Athol!" I exclaimed breathlessly.

"Hush!"

"Oh, is it——?"

"It is."

"In there! Only beyond that wall, and I——Oh, Mr. Kelso!" My distress went to his heart, I well knew; it might have melted a rock.

"Mattie, Mattie! Come to me!" Again that thrilling cry.

"Dinna ye speak," whispered the old man. "He must have hard ye; that is not the voice of delirium."

"Oh, what shall I do? This will make him worse—if he knows I am here and——"

"Hush, that's a good lass! Just wait a minute; if he *is* conscious, this is the first sign. I will go in and quiet

him." And once more he left me alone in the little room, within a few feet of my poor darling, whom I heard yet again calling on me by name.

"Oh, yes, Athol, I *will* come—I *will* come," I murmured to myself passionately, "in spite of everything, my own love—in spite of everybody!"

There was a lull; then the low rumbling of the clergyman's deep voice became audible. He was trying to soothe his sick son by gentle remonstrance, but it was of no avail. Once more the dear sufferer broke out in his impetuous cry for me. I could bear it no longer. I was on the point of rushing from the room, and following Mr. Kelso, when, to my surprise, the folding doors were softly opened a little way, and the parson's rugged face appeared at the aperture. He beckoned me with a motion of his head. I was at the other door with my hand already on the handle. I glided across to him quickly.

"It is no use," he whispered, "the mischief is done. He does know you are here, and refuses to be comforted till he has seen ye. Go to him, Mattie. *I* must take the responsibility of this."

I was in a tremor of excitement and agitation. I could scarcely believe this was no dream. I could not even whisper my thanks, but pressed his hand in grateful silence; then, still holding mine, he drew me gently and courteously past him into the dimly-lighted sick-room.

I was unable to discern the wasted features of my poor boy as he lay in the deep shadow; but he saw me, and uttered a broken exclamation of joy. In an instant I was down on my knees by the bed, my face nestling softly on the pillow beside his. This was enough; neither spoke; we could give no words to our pent-up feelings at that delirious moment. I lay there silent for several seconds, minutes, with one arm stolen softly round his

neck, while he lifted his poor thin hand, and clasped mine upon the pillow.

At last he whispered in my ear, oh, so sweetly and tenderly: "Ah, Mattie darling, if God should be pleased to take me now, *this* was worth coming home for, my own, my faithful love!"

I tried to answer him, but my heart was in my throat, choking me. I pressed his burning lips with mine. And again a deep silence reigned between us.

Presently he spoke.

"How did you manage to come, little darling? Does he know——?"

"Your father will tell you. At this sacred moment, dear one, I can think only of *you*. Oh, Athol, pray with me." Then followed another deep silence, the while our hearts rose in unison to God.

I do not know how long I stayed with him after we had prayed together; the quiet, blissful minutes flew by. Little outward sign passed between us beyond an endearing murmur at intervals, a soft pressure of the hand. At last Mr. Kelso touched me upon the shoulder, and I knew that I must go. I rose from my kneeling position; I stood hanging fondly over the bed, and now for the first time realised the shocking change in my lover's handsome face—so pinched, so wan, so ploughed by the cruel share of suffering, and the weary months of pain and sickness. As I gazed at him through a blur of tears, it agonised me to think of all he had undergone. Ah, if the stern old General were only standing here in my place, and looking upon that wreck of a splendid young soldier, who had spent his best blood for his country, I believed even *his* heart, his soldier's heart, would be touched. As this thought came upon me, I resolved to appeal to him, and confess what I had done the instant I returned home.

"Now, my lass, please," murmured the patient Mr. Kelso in my ear, reminding me that I must not linger any longer.

"You will come again?—to-morrow, Mattie?" my boy asked, so anxiously.

I could not give a doubtful promise; I smiled and kissed him in reply.

Notwithstanding Mr. Kelso's kind words, and his pledge to accept the responsibility, I felt grave misgivings at the step I had taken; I dared not think what might happen in consequence; but I would not have undone it for the world; any misgivings were far outweighed by the thankful joy of having seen Athol. What a strange conflict of feelings was mine! Apprehension, hope, despair, happiness, and sadness all mingled and jostling together in my brain.

The sky had cleared, the moon risen, when I left the parsonage; it had changed to a beautiful night. As I walked away from the house, escorted by Athol's father, a gentle confidence, the offspring of faith in God, rose above every other feeling in my bosom.

Mr. Kelso accompanied me to the bridge. I would not take him further and into my grandfather's grounds. I would not allow him to lay himself open to a charge of trespass if I did myself to one of disobedience. When I bade him good night, he told me not to be nervous, that he intended to write a note to the General in the morning and explain how matters had come about. Under those circumstances, I thought I would defer my confession until after such note had been received. But an obstacle arose to prevent my making it that evening which I had hardly taken into consideration. When I returned, I found our house shut up and every light extinguished. It was not late, only about half-past ten; I noticed the time before I left the Rectory. Could every one have retired so early

—so much earlier than usual—and had I not been missed? I paused at the front-door, hesitating whether to ring. All at once it occurred to me that this barring-out was by special orders of my grandfather. Doubtless *he* had missed me again, and knew well enough where I had gone. I felt so sure of this, that I decided not to ring, but went round to the servants' offices instead. There all was as still as the grave—not a glimmer of light shone even from one of the bedroom windows. Yes, there was no question about it, this was a conspiracy to frighten me—a conspiracy between master and servants to keep me outside all night in fearful meditation of my sin. It was quite like old times—so very characteristic of Gaunchester-Haugh and its playful ways.

The sensation of being locked out is only equalled by that of being locked in; I felt as much a prisoner under the moonlit roof of heaven as I used to feel under the cracked ceiling of my bedroom when left alone with my thoughts and penitential bread and water. I hammered impatiently at the doors in the back court-yard, and shouted "Scroils!" "Harriet!" "Nathan!" at the top of my voice—but no answer. After a while I came to the conclusion, that since this was so obviously a plot, it was useless to stand there any longer and waste my breath trying to make myself heard. Like the blind who won't see, there are none so deaf as those who won't hear, so I gave up calling and knocking. Now, what should I do? My first thought was to go back to the parsonage, my second to sleep in the straw-barn, my third the hay-loft, if I could get there—but then I remembered the rats, and dared not. No, there was nothing for it but to sleep out on a garden bench under the dews of a moist summer night, or better still, seek a leafy couch—like the Babes in the Wood—somewhere in the warmth and

shelter of our evergreen forest. That was my fifth thought and final decision.

The most protected spot I could think of was the erst hiding-place of my infant-hood, in the thick ivy at the back of the tomb-like structure (which, by the way, *was* an old tomb, as I had long since learnt; whose, no one could tell me). It was not so very damp there, considering the recent downpour, for the branches overhead were like umbrellas; then it was certainly softer than a hard-ribbed bench, and unexposed to the falling dew, if there was any. So there I spread my cloak and made my bed, in the middle of the friendly ivy, ensconcing myself in the identical nook (now far more overgrown) which I remembered to have sought years before to escape from my grandfather's wrath.

CHAPTER XII.

THE WRITING ON THE PANEL

I SLEPT uneasily; Queen Mab indulged me with her wildest freaks, and I dreamt the most fantastic, shifting dreams, which came of the strange conflict in my mind before I lay me down to rest—dreams of the dinning battle-field; of our peaceful meadows; of a gloomy death-chamber; of a bright, cheerful room on my marriage morning; of ghostly terrors; of a house of many phantoms; of the strangest sights and contradictory scenes; and through all I saw the face of my grandfather ever lurid and threatening; at his elbow that crafty-looking, fox-like fellow, Zollern, with his uncongenial smile perpetually lurking behind his huge black moustache. I awoke

several times with a start, to fall off again and dream on as before. When I awoke outright, feeling feverish and unrefreshed, it was very early; the birds were just beginning to twitter, the crimson harbingers of day to drive before them the black monsters of the night. Gradually the morning light forced its way through the raven foliage over my head, and penetrated to my nest of glossy green. Though wide awake, I did not get up, but lay for a long time with my eyes open, thinking—preparing for the coming cyclone, which I dreaded as a consumptive martyr dreads the blasts of March. I was in no hurry, indeed, to go up to the house and precipitate matters. I meant to put off doing so as long as possible—to give time for the old parson's flag of truce to arrive first on the field. Gradually I relapsed into a comatose condition, and finally dropped off to sleep again.

I must have slept some time, when a rustling amongst the trees disturbed me. I thought it was the wind, for a light breeze had sprung up since dawn; but presently the smell of tobacco was wafted towards me. Some one was smoking close by. I rose very gently, and peeped round the ivied mass in front of me.

On the other side stood Captain Zollern, with the eternal cigarette between his lips, surveying the tomb. He had found it by accident, seemingly, and was no doubt wondering, as I had often done, whose it was and why it was there. He stooped down and parted the ivy with his hand, as if to search for the inscription. I had looked for it before now, and found only a single letter and a date. Little enough to afford information, but it appeared to interest him a good deal, and I heard him muttering something to himself, whilst his face wore a grave, thoughtful look as he rose erect from examining the stone. Perhaps he knew who lay buried there; perhaps my grandfather had been more communicative to him than to me,

since they had made such friends. They were often together now, holding private conference. Their intimacy puzzled me more and more. Knowing what I did of my grandfather's character, of his habitual reserve and unsociability, it was altogether incomprehensible to me that this man, a perfect stranger but a few weeks ago, should have gained such favour with him and have succeeded so thoroughly, to all appearances, in worming himself into the old man's confidence. Surely it could not alone be on account of that well-intentioned warning as to my deceased father's threatened onslaught!

I did not reveal my presence behind the tomb, but lay quiet till Captain Zollern went away, which he did a few minutes afterwards. From his being about I argued that it must be later than I thought (I had no watch with me), probably near breakfast-time. So, my hour had come! I waited till his footsteps had died off in the distance, when I quitted my verdant couch and went up to the house. In doing so I made a slight *détour*, and entered by a side-door instead of as usual. I dreaded to meet my grandfather, but knew such meeting could not be long avoided. I began to find that I stood in nearly as much awe of him, now that I was grown up, as I did when a little girl. Just as I was stealing upstairs he came out of the dining-room. He saw me, I think, but said nothing, and went on his way to his den. I consulted the Louis Quatorze clock on the mantel-piece in the hall—my goodness, it was past ten! Then breakfast was finished long ago! I had overslept myself nicely; and Captain Zollern, when I saw him, was enjoying his after-breakfast smoke instead of an early morning ramble.

I went into my bedroom with a strong foreboding of evil—with that wretched feeling of apprehension

that something unpleasant is about to happen, and looked upon my dressing-table rather expecting to see a note from my grandfather. But there was nothing. So far this was a relief, but only a respite, I was quite sure. There was not the slightest doubt in my mind that I had been purposely locked out last night, and that the General was as fully cognisant of my movements after I left his presence as if he had followed me and kept at my elbow all the time. No doubt Lola would have something to tell me, so to her I went. I knocked at her bedroom door, but received no answer; knocked a second and third time, still no answer; then tried and found it fastened. I was just going away when I caught a sob, then a moaning sound within. I called out through the door:

"Lola, are you there, dear? What's the matter?" The sounds ceased. "What's the matter, Lola?"

I heard her moving—pour water into a basin—splash for a few seconds. Then she undid the door and admitted me.

"Good morning, dear. Ah! are you ill?" I asked—and well I might; her face was deathly white. I could see she had been crying; her lovely eyes were red and swollen.

"I am not very well," she replied, kissing me. "It's that horrid neuralgia; it kept me awake all night. I'm better now, though. Where in the world have you been, Mattie? *You* don't look well; you're as pale as a ghost. You look as if you hadn't slept either."

"Oh, yes, I have," I replied, with a feeble laugh; "too much. I am only just awake."

"But where have you been, dear? You didn't sleep at the Rectory, did you?"

"No, not exactly; but I was detained there;" then I told her where I had passed the night.

"Well, I never! What a funny girl you are!"

"Did the General ask for me again last evening?"

"No—I think he knew where you were."

"I expect he did; besides, I told him I had been down to the Rectory once already. Did he seem very angry?"

"Not that I noticed. He said nothing to me; but he ordered the butler to do up the house, and made us go off to bed rather sooner than usual."

"That was done on purpose, I know. And were you at breakfast?"

"Yes."

"Did he say anything then?"

"Not a word."

"And never remarked on my not coming down?"

"No."

"Did Captain Zollern say anything?"

"He only mentioned casually that you were rather late."

"That's all? I believe that man's in league against me, Lola," I added after a moment.

"In league against you, dear! With whom? Why should you fancy such a thing?"

"I don't know—instinct, I suppose. There'll be a nice storm by-and-by."

"I hope not, for your sake."

"Oh, yes, there will. I'm looking forward to it."

"Poor little Mattie! I'm sure one can hardly blame you for going there last night. Tell me, how is he?"

"Very, very ill."

"Oh, I'm so sorry to hear it." She took my hand sympathetically in hers. We were now sitting together on the sofa. "I know what you must be suffering—the suspense and anxiety. Your face looks so drawn and sad. I feel for you very much; indeed I do, dear. And did you see him, after all?"

"Yes, but don't say anything about it."

"Of course I won't."

"I mean, don't tell that Captain Zollern."

"Certainly not; why should I?"

"It might make matters worse, but I dare say he knows; he seems to be always consulting privately with my grandfather. I wish the fellow was a million miles away."

"Never mind him, Mattie. Tell me about last night."

I related to her what had taken place, and talked of poor Athol for some time. But by-and-by I turned the conversation back to our Hungarian guest, for it was on my mind to speak to her seriously about this man. One or two things had roused my suspicions lately, I cannot say exactly what, but I did not feel easy to notice the familiarity with which he treated Lola. I thought it was time to warn her, or at all events give her my opinion concerning him.

"I want to ask you something, Loir," I said gravely.

"What is it, dear?"

"It's about this Captain Zollern and—yourself." She started and coloured. "Don't think me impertinent, but, tell me, hasn't he made overtures to you?"

"Why do you ask that? What do you mean by overtures?" She was looking away from me, trying to hide her mantled cheek by pretending to search for something behind the sofa-cushion.

"Love, of course," I said; "at least, what *he* may call love."

She laughed, a forced, hollow laugh.

"I know he has," I continued. "Well, I suppose you needn't be ashamed of it, and I am sure I am not jealous."

"I presume not, but why do you attack me like this?"

"Because I wish to warn you against the man." Again she started, or I should say, rather, shuddered, and pressed her under-lip hard with her white teeth. "I wish to tell you in plain English that I think he's a *brute!*"

"Come, that's very plain English. Supposing now that he *had* made overtures to me, as you term it, and that I had accepted them—in other words, that we had fallen in love with each other—it would not be very pleasant to hear you say that, would it?"

"Perhaps it wouldn't; but I know you're *not* in love—nor is he—so I don't want you to drift into it, and—and be made a fool of."

"Thank you, dear; I quite appreciate your motive," she answered quietly, "and your being solicitous about my welfare and happiness; but you needn't be afraid, I can take care of myself. I cannot understand your rooted objection, though, to poor Captain Zollern. Why is it? Only the other day you were saying that you liked him much better, and I'm sure he likes *you*." I shook my head peremptorily. "Yes, he does; I'll answer for that. Again, I say, what *is* your objection to him? What is the reason of this newly-arisen aversion?"

I hesitated.

"Do tell me."

"I *have* told you: because I think he is a brute."

"But, my dear Mattie, that's coarse——"

"I don't care; it's true."

"A silly prejudice——"

"I only wonder you can defend him——"

"Why, what do you mean?"—I saw she was still looking very uncomfortable.—"Do be a little plainer."

"Very well, then, I will. Lola, I tell you that man *was* at the pool that day, and—and overlooked us."

"Oh, no, he wasn't!" The colour in her cheek heightened still more.

"He was—I'm nearly positive. I saw him stealing away afterwards. He's a vile, sneaking, ungentlemanlike —*cad!*"

She laughed, but not an easy, natural laugh, and replied:

"No, my dear Mattie, he is nothing of the sort. You are quite mistaken. He was not there."

"How do you mean? How do you know he wasn't?"

"Because I asked him!"

"*You* asked him!"

"Yes, certainly. After what you said, I was determined to know, and he vowed solemnly that he was *not*."

"Then's he a most awful—Ananias, that's all."

"Really, dear, I don't think you ought to talk like that of the man; he's a gentleman, and *I* believe him. He was most good-natured about it; not a bit cross or indignant when I questioned him on the matter, but he very much wondered at our fancying such a thing possible."

"I dare say," said I drily. "Well, remain in your belief, and I must remain in mine. Yours is the most comfortable, certainly——"

"And the most just and sensible too, my dear Mattie, pray take my word for it."

"I wish I could," I thought, but I made no further reply, and with this our conversation ended.

I was not a whit shaken in my conviction by what Lola had said, nor was it lost upon me that all her answers were more or less evasive, and that she seemed to fight shy at the mention of any love passage having taken place between

her and the man. But very soon I had other matter to occupy my thoughts.

At luncheon-time we all met, when, rather to my surprise, my grandfather's manner was the same to me as usual; no allusion was made either by him or Captain Zollern to my disappearance the previous evening. This puzzled me, but I supposed the old man was waiting to have it out with me alone by-and-by, to administer a good sound birching, morally; physically, he might not have found it quite so easy now. I expected him to summon me to his study after luncheon, but he didn't. And yet he must have heard from Mr. Kelso by this time, if the latter had kept his promise, which I made no doubt of. Perhaps my grandfather was thinking it over. I resolved to wait a little longer before I volunteered my confession.

On leaving the dining-room I took up my garden-hat from the hall-table, intending to bury myself in the walks and meditate on my touching meeting with poor Athol last night. I only trusted the excitement had made him no worse. I longed, yet dreaded to hear how he was, nor did I mean to let the day pass without ascertaining. How to do so I knew not, unless I again went over to the Rectory. Later, an opportunity came, but, alas, how handicapped with woe!

Lola La Touche and Captain Zollern were standing talking together at the front-door as I went towards it. They made way for me, and I was about to pass them, when he stopped me suddenly by asking:

"Do you happen to remember, Miss Freith, what day of the month it was when I came to this house first?"

"Do you mean that first evening?" I said.

"Yes."

"I should think I do, considering how you frightened us; the third of June."

"I thought so."

"I put it down in my diary, with a big cross against it, as the most horrible night I ever spent in my life."

He smiled.

"Ah, well, I'm forgiven for that, am I not?" he said. "I trust you may never pass a *more* horrible night, Miss Freith; that the phantoms of your pillow may always prove phantoms, and nothing more; imagined dangers always imaginary—as in that instance."

I did not take much heed of this remark at the time, but I remembered it afterwards.

"The third of June—yes, I thought so," he repeated. "I want to show you ladies something. I don't know whether you have ever noticed it before. Look there." He pointed to some faint pencil writing on the inner panel of the folding shutter by the front-door. "Can you make it out?"

I looked, and after close examination deciphered

"Waller Freith, June 3rd, 1840,"

and some foreign words underneath.

"Now, that was the date of your father's first and only visit to this house," Captain Zollern went on; "under what circumstances you have already heard. The General recollects it well, and made a memorandum of it then. I have not shown him this yet; I only saw it myself this morning. It was, doubtless, written by your father as a vague kind of threat, which (by chance, I take it, rather than intention, considering his condition) he meant to carry out on the very anniversary of that day nineteen years afterwards. Strange fatality, was it not?—happily averted. You see, there is a Latin proverb attached:

"'Malo nodo malus quærendus cuneus.'

But perhaps you don't understand Latin. It means, literally, a hard tool is required to undo a hard knot—and he found the General a precious hard knot, I expect—in other words, desperate ends call forth desperate means. That is what he wished to convey by the threat, I suppose. What he intended to do when he wrote it, heaven alone knows. Probably he didn't know himself."

I was silent for a minute; then said: "I don't see why you should show this to my grandfather, Captain Zollern, and rake up further memory of my unhappy father. I shall rub it out."

Suiting the action to the word, I put a corner of my handkerchief to my lips, and did so before he could prevent me. He smiled at my promptness.

"Well, at any rate, *you've* seen it," he said, "and Miss La Touche. Shakespeare suggests that only

> Two may keep counsel, putting one away.

But though we are three, we will continue to keep ours, and not let the General make a fourth, shall we? for, as you observe, it is just as well he should not be further reminded of his luckless son-in-law. Then we will say no more about that little bit of writing."

CHAPTER XIII.

THE SECRET OF THE TOMB

THE water-spout deluge of the previous evening which had proved my friend, for the moment, had proved the gardener's enemy, and had played the very mischief with old Nathan Slugg's attempts at horticulture. On my way to the walks I made a tour of inspection, and was examining the churned-up beds, with their poor beaten-down flowers and woeful array of broken stalks—long, lanky geraniums (for which we were famous) being cut off in the prime of their maturity—when Captain Zollern joined me.

"Examining the dead and wounded, Miss Freith?" he said. "Quite like a battle-field, isn't it? Apropos of the wounded, what became of *you* last night?" He asked this with a laugh.

I tried to look unconcerned, and, I expect, was rather rude.

"Oh, I suppose *you* know all about it," I answered pertly. "No doubt you and my grandfather have duly talked me over."

"I am afraid that wouldn't be an easy matter, to talk you over, Miss Freith," he said, with another laugh which set my teeth on edge—"I mean, to guide or influence you. I think you are a young lady who prefers to act on impulse."

"I quite understand you, but in this case, as it happens, I acted on accident, not impulse. I am presuming you do know all about it, you see."

"I fancy I do, if you refer to what took place last night. You went into that house after all, didn't you?"

"I don't know why I should criminate myself by confessing anything to *you*, Captain Zollern; but it doesn't much matter, I suppose. Yes, I did."

"And you saw that young man?"

"I did, but it was all quite by force of circumstances—accidental circumstances; not that that will make any difference, perhaps. General Crutwell has received a note from Mr. Kelso, has he not?"

"I really don't know. I am not aware that he has."

"Um, that's funny. Of course you would know if he had."

"I am not at all sure that I should. Why should I?"

"Oh, of course you would," with an irritable toss of my head, "he'd have told you; you're quite his second self, it seems to me."

"Ah, I understand, Miss Freith; you are jealous," and up went that great black moustache showing his glistening teeth.

"Oh dear no, not at all," I laughed grimly; "if the General likes to make a confidant of you or any one else, it matters nothing to me. I could never make one of *him*."

"I wish you would make one of your humble servant."

"Do you? You'd like to run with the hare and hunt with the hounds, I suppose? That would be nice and exciting, wouldn't it?"

"You are rather tart, Miss Freith, but I don't think you mean all you say."

"Indeed I do."

"That's a pity, then; but never mind, I want you to be serious now. I want to talk to you very seriously, if you will allow me. Remember, I have already confided in *you*."

"Well, yes, you have," I replied, less flippantly;

"and what did you wish to talk to me about, Captain Zollern?"

"About poor young Kelso."

A subject I could not very well resist; at the same time I did not care much to discuss my lover with this man.

"What about him, Captain Zollern?" I asked, rather suspectingly.

"I will tell you directly. Let us take a stroll through those lovely old walks, shall we?"

I demurred for an instant, then assented by turning towards them.

"Now, what did you wish to say?" I inquired, as he did not speak again for some time.

"Well, just this, Miss Freith—but will you accept a piece of advice, if I offer it?"

"That depends——"

"Meaning, you may accept it, but to follow it would be another matter. However, remember, I am a disinterested person—perfectly disinterested—and my reason for offering such advice is merely because I like you—excuse my bluntness—like you very much indeed. I think you are a good, honest girl at heart, and—and only want a little management to——"

"Really—thank you!"

"Ah, yes, you are impatient of such fatherly sentiments, as you call them, from a stranger, but I mean you well, I do indeed. I only wish you would try to look upon me more as a friend instead of——"

"Oh, we are quite good friends surely, Captain Zollern," I interrupted, with a little convenient humbug. "To prove that, you are going to offer me a piece of advice, and I'm going to—hear what it is. Well?"

"Well—ar—um—I wanted to tell you that I cannot bear to see a young lady in your position, with such

splendid prospects before you, deliberately and wilfully doing her best to ruin them—acting in such a suicidal manner, with such an utter and systematic disregard of self-interest—pursuing a course of egregious and headstrong folly—excuse the term—which can only end disastrously. Your grandfather is rich, you are his heiress, but—he can disinherit you. Are you not afraid of this, if you persist in pulling dead against him?"

"I never thought of it in such a light," I answered tersely, in reply to his rather wordy speech.

"I'll be bound you didn't; love is blind from a financial as well as romantic point of view. Now, you are in love; you care for this young fellow with all your soul, don't you?"

"I should think I do!" I cried ingenuously; adding, with sudden constraint, "but such feelings are sacred with me, Captain Zollern. I don't carry my heart on my sleeve. I don't wish to parade my love, therefore——"

"No, certainly not; forgive me, I did not mean to usurp the part of father confessor. I only wished to convince myself of your earnestness; and since I see you *are* very much in earnest, let me implore you to be careful—to pause before you go too far. You are so young, so guileless and innocent of the world; your path is beset with difficulties, dangers. Be warned by me; do not sacrifice your interests needlessly. Why fly in the face of Fortune? Wait and see what Fortune will do for you——"

"And is that your advice?"

"It is—my emphatic advice."

"Which tends to this, I presume: that I should give up him I love for mere mercenary considerations; that I should tear my love out of my heart to put money in my purse. Isn't that what you mean?"

"Well, not precisely. I only wish to advise you not to

be too precipitate, not to blight your future and throw away a large fortune for the sake of a little sentiment of the hour."

"Pardon me, but when you call my love a little sentiment of the hour, you contradict yourself, having just said that you see I am very much in earnest. Such an inconsistent way of talking hardly proves, I think, that *you* are very much in earnest in trying to persuade me, or else——"

"Nay; that, of course, was a mere *façon de parler*——"

"Well, never mind. You don't know me if you think that any argument or consideration would shake me in my allegiance, especially *now*. I do not quite understand you, I confess. Your object may be very kind, but your advice is premature and ill-timed. I mean it comes at a time when he, the subject of our conversation, is lying dangerously ill. I cannot, if I would, weigh worldly matters in my mind with his dear life hanging in the balance."

"But if he is spared, Miss Freith—if he should recover, as I sincerely hope he may, poor fellow, you will surely not persist in this ill-advised course; you will appeal to him to consider your interests, the interests of you both, nor make him an accomplice in an act of deliberate suicide. Recollect, he is a penniless soldier, without a prospect beyond his ill-paid profession, and your grandfather can, by a stroke of his pen, make you a penniless girl. Would you put nothing to nothing and live upon air? Don't try it; others have done so before you and repented it but once—for the rest of their lives."

"I repeat, Captain Zollern, we need not discuss this subject any further. I do not wish to do so—I do not consider the present at all a fitting time——"

"As you will, Miss Freith; at least you will not forget what I have said, and by-and-by, perhaps, at a more

desirable season you may be better inclined to listen to me."

I did not consider such a contingency probable, but made no reply. And here an opportunity occurred to change the conversation, for we had sauntered inadvertently in the direction of my last night's resting-place, and were now close to the juniper-guarded tomb.

"Did you ever look in through there, Captain Zollern?" I asked suddenly, pointing to the spot.

"I have. Why?"

"Do you know anything about it? Do you know who is buried in that tomb? Perhaps my grandfather has told you?"

"Really, I am not prepared to say at this moment," he replied hesitatingly; "that is, I don't recollect his having done so." He appeared to be trying to think.

"Oh!—Let us go and look at it, shall we?" We went towards it. "Here is another grave, you see," I said, drawing attention to a small stone tablet on our way which bore the brief record:

"VALDOR. October 27th, 1839.
"Faithful unto death."

"That is the grave of an old favourite dog, my grandfather tells me," I went on, "a wolf-hound which he brought over with him from abroad. I used to think it was a child's grave. The date, you'll observe, is the same as that on the tomb. They died on the same day here, I believe—the person, whoever it was, and the hound. My grandfather never told me the name of the former; isn't it funny? He says it was some stranger, and I could never find out any more. Did he tell you?"

"Well, now I come to think of it, Miss Freith, I believe he did." By this time we had reached the tomb,

and were standing in front of it. "How stupid of me to forget; but I remember now. The story is this. A certain lady lies buried there—a foreigner, I understand she was, or of foreign extraction. She was staying at Gaunchester-Haugh in the autumn, and accidentally fell into that river"—pointing to the Furion—"during the floods, when it was swollen and overtopping its banks; and that brave dog there, Valdor, it appears, leapt into the stream and tried to rescue her; but, unfortunately, both were drowned."

"Really? Fancy my never hearing even that much before! How queer the General is, and everybody else, I think!"—in this I included his ancient retinue. "Poor thing, how very sad! This tomb looks older than the dog's gravestone, doesn't it?"

"Yes, on account of the ivy."

"But how is it she was buried here, I wonder, and not in the churchyard?"

"For some reason connected with religion, no doubt."

"But what was her name? Why isn't it on the tomb?"

"Well, you see—perhaps under the circumstances—ar——" He hesitated. "Really, I can hardly answer you that. You are rather pressing with your questions, Miss Freith."

I looked up at him. He was *not* trying to hide a smile as usual.

"You know more than you have told me," I remarked.

"Why do you think so?"

He little guessed that I had watched him a few hours ago.

"Never mind why—I do think so; in fact, I'm sure of it. Don't you, now?"

"Well, if I must confess, I do." Then he muttered to himself: "I had better tell her, I suppose."

My ears were as sharp as a Red Indian's. I heard him.

"Yes, you had," I said—"I mean you may as well tell me now. What's the mystery? Is there any?"

"No mystery exactly; but there is a secret attached to this tomb—a secret which the General has imparted to me."

"I knew he had, and yet he couldn't tell me, his own grandchild!"

"He had a reason."

"What?"

"Then must I again betray the General's confidence? If I do, will you promise me as before that you will keep such secret to yourself?"

"Of course I will, Captain Zollern; you needn't ask me that."

"Well, then, since you would know the real story of that tomb, the lady lying under there was Waller Freith's wife—the General's daughter——"

"My mother!" I exclaimed, in astonishment.

"Yes, your poor mother."

"Good heavens! is that really so?"

"It is."

"But why was she buried here? Pray tell me more."

"I can only give you this further explanation, that she ran away from home, as you know already, and made what they called in the county a sad *mésalliance*, thereby bringing discredit, as General Crutwell considered, on his house and name. Some little time after her marriage she returned, came flying back to her father's roof, having quarrelled seriously with her husband, in which quarrel she had stabbed him—as she believed, fatally, but happily that was not the case. Still she was never destined to know this, and her mental agony was intense. Under

cover of darkness she stole up to the house one night when a savage mastiff, which by some mischance was loose about the grounds, seized her by the throat, pulled her down, and mangled her in a most frightful manner."

"Oh, how awful!" I cried.

"It was, indeed, awful, but I regret to say worse remains behind. The dog, it seems, must have been mad, for she, poor thing, was seized with hydrophobia three months later and died, after suffering the most horrible agonies. Believing herself a murderess, death came as a relief to her mental, as well as physical, torture. Her last request was that her dreadful end should be kept a secret from the world, and that she should be buried anonymously on this spot."

He finished; thus from the same lips I learned the tragedy of my mother's death as I had learned that of my father. I was too much shocked and overcome to speak. I stood staring in silence for several minutes at the grave of my poor unhappy mother, my eyes swimming with tears. Surely there had never been revealed to any daughter upon this earth a more painful history of her parentage than had been revealed to me. I had indeed been hurled into the world on the wings of a terrible tempest of human passions, sufferings, and woe.

After a while I said:

"Then it is not true that she was drowned in the river?"

"No, but that was the first version I received from your grandfather, and so I passed it on to you, for I thought it would be better you should hear that than the actual facts. But you pressed me closely, and the same point on which you nonplussed me nonplussed the General. I asked him the same questions you did me, about the tomb and the inscription, which drew from

him the real story. Now, Miss Freith, remember, it is a sacred secret; I trust you will not forget that."

I shook my head solemnly.

"You *may* trust me," I replied. Suddenly a thought swept across my mind, and I exclaimed: "Ah, my birthday is to-morrow, the fifteenth of July. I was born here in the old house; that was after my poor mother's return —how long after——"

"It was on the same night, or rather on the morning following her sad accident; the accident, indeed, was the immediate cause, you understand—your birth was premature."

There was another silence.

"You never knew my mother, did you, Captain Zollern?" I inquired all at once.

"I, Miss Freith! never."

"You will wonder at my asking, perhaps; the reason I do so is that I saw you here this morning, when you did not think any one was near."

"Indeed! And where were you?"

"Behind there."

"Behind that tomb! What for? hiding?"

"No, I slept there last night—with my poor mother, though I little dreamt it."

"You don't mean to say you really slept there?"

"Yes, I did. I was locked out; locked out of the house on purpose; didn't *you* know I was?"

"No, I certainly didn't."

"I think you did."

"I didn't, really. How should I?"

I could not believe that. I began to think this man was given to lying like truth, which tended to throw doubt on all he had told me. Yet what object could he have in

deceiving me with such stories? Surely not to amuse himself at my expense!

"And you actually slept there?" he said, after a pause.

"Yes; and I slept very well, too, when I had once settled down and got rid of a few nightmares. It's the warmest and most sheltered nook you could find."

He stepped forward and looked at my last night's bed, which Dame Nature had not yet had time to re-make. It showed plainly where I had lain.

"Extraordinary! most extraordinary! Who would have imagined such a thing?" he said, more to himself than to me. "And you were huddled behind there when I came after breakfast to look at this tomb?"

"I was."

"How you might have frightened me! If you had only jumped up, I should have taken you for a ghost—your mother's ghost—by heaven, I should!" He was looking hard into my face. "And you watched me?"

"I did; and I guessed you knew more about this grave than I do, because you seemed so much interested."

"What did I say? Did you hear me say anything?"

"No; I judged from your face."

"Well, the reason I may have appeared so interested was that I had only just heard the story; it was only last evening that General Crutwell told me the secret of that tomb."

CHAPTER XIV.

HOW THE GENERAL INSULTS THE PARSON AT MY EXPENSE

About an hour after this, I met my grandfather walking by himself in the garden. This was my opportunity; and feeling sure he must have received Mr. Kelso's note by now, I took a header into the matter, and asked him point-blank.

"Yes, I have," he replied, "and I have sent an answer."

He was about to pass me without another word. There was something gruesomely queer about his manner. He was certainly not a pleasant bull to take by the horns—quietly yet powerfully repellent, with a sort of negative power, a weird passiveness. I would have much rather he had knocked me down and trampled on me, than to thus severely leave me alone. I think he saw I wanted to confess and make a clean breast of it, and so wouldn't give me the chance, preferring to nurse the goblin of his wrath close in his bosom to letting it fly away into oblivion and taking me in its place.

"Mr. Kelso has told you, I suppose, grandpapa?" I said.

"Oh, yes, he has. I am not surprised. There is Mr. Kelso's note; you can see what he says." He took it from his breast-pocket, and handed it to me. "If you go to him, perhaps he will show you what *I* said." With that he walked on.

I remained standing where he left me, and read Mr.

Kelso's letter. It was that of a perfect gentleman, every word of it. He expressed himself most courteously, took all the blame, and absolved me entirely, adding kindly at the end, that "it was with the greatest difficulty he could persuade me to accept shelter under his roof, though overtaken by such a drenching downfall."

Nothing could have been more conciliatory and explicit. I wondered how my grandfather had replied to him. Not in the same pleasant strain, I feared. How greatly in contrast was that answer I was to learn all too soon.

I accepted the General's last words to me as permission to go over to the parsonage again if I chose, and I did so at once—it was then about 5 p.m.; but to inquire about Athol was, of course, my first and foremost object in going. On my way there I saw Lola and Captain Zollern walking together by the river. I thought he had his arm round her waist as I approached, but was not sure. They were also going towards the bridge, which we reached at the same time.

"Ah! off for a constitutional, Miss Freith?" said he. I was sailing along at a good pace. "We were just thinking of having a row down the river. Will you join us?"

Hitherto I have omitted to mention that we had a boat-house and boat at the bottom of our fields, which boat afforded us considerable recreation during the summer months.

"No, thank you; I can't now," I replied, "as I am going over to the Rectory."

"Indeed!"

"Yes; but you needn't look so surprised," I added triumphantly, his irritating expression prompting the

boast, "I am not going without the General's permission this time."

"Do you mean to say he gave you leave?" asked Lola.

"Yes, just now, on business," I answered, with an air of mystery. "I shall be back presently—hope you'll enjoy your row," and I hurried on. When I had gone a few paces, I fancied I heard Lola laughing softly, and turned to look. Yes, they were both laughing. No doubt I amused them by my manner.

Having arrived at the parsonage, I rang the front-door bell in the usual way, on this my second visit, and asked if Mr. Kelso was at home. Yes, would I please to walk in? I was about to do so, when he appeared suddenly in the entrance-hall. He came quickly towards the door, and exclaimed, holding up his hand as if to stop me from crossing the threshold:

"Nay, don't ye trouble to come in, Miss Freith, please. I'll come out to you, and we can have a turn in the garden —ahem!"

I thought this rather odd, and his tone was abrupt, excited.

"How is he, Mr. Kelso?" I asked immediately.

"A little better, I am thankful to say, Miss Freith."

"Oh, I'm so delighted!"

He did not call me Mattie, I noticed, as he did last night. We were now moving away from the house, and walked on to the lawn.

"I am greatly obliged to you for your very kind letter to my grandfather, Mr. Kelso," was my next sentence. "I have just seen it."

"Oh, have ye?"

"Yes; and I am sure that you said all that was

possible. It has evidently had a good effect on the General, for he gave me leave to come here again."

A very left-handed permission, true, but I thought I was justified in making the most of it.

"Ech, but ye canna mean that, surely?" returned Mr. Kelso. "To tell ye the truth, I was very much surprised to see ye."

"Were you? Well, I do mean it. He said he had answered your letter, and that if I liked to go to you again, you would no doubt show me that answer."

"Ah, I understand—insult to insult. Yes, I *will* show ye. There's his letter."

He put it into my hand, and I read it:

"GAUNCHESTER-HAUGH,
"*July 14th*, 1859.

"General Crutwell presents his compliments to the Reverend Kenneth Kelso, and begs to acknowledge the receipt of his note. No explanation was necessary to exonerate Miss Freith for the step she took last night. General Crutwell quite understands Mr. Kelso's kind motive in volunteering such explanation, and desires to assure him that that motive is duly appreciated. It is only right Mr. Kelso should be informed that Miss Freith's prospects as heir-presumptive to the Gaunchester estates, depend solely and entirely upon the will of the present possessor, and are unassured by any hereditary claim in the law of entail. General Crutwell, in conclusion, desires to convey to Mr. Kelso his sympathy for the illness of his son, Lieutenant Kelso, of the 93rd Sutherland Highlanders, and sincerely hopes that he may be spared to prove a good soldier to his country and a blessing to his

father and mother, instead of that curse which is too often brought upon parents by children of ill-regulated mind and disorganised disposition."

That meant me!

I handed back the letter to Mr. Kelso in silence.

"What do you think of it, Miss Freith?" he asked.

"Well, it's a very formal letter," I replied artlessly; "not a nice kind one such as you wrote. But then you are aware my grandfather is so very——"

"Ech, but I see ye don't understand it," interrupted the old clergyman. "That letter is a downright insult, Miss Freith—a direct personal insult to *me!*"

"But how, Mr. Kelso? I certainly don't understand that quite."

"Why, it's joost this. The allusion to your poseetion as heiress to the Gaunchester estates is nae more nor less than a gross insinuation that I, in trying to put matters straight, am actuated only by mercenary motives; that I look upon ye as a good money match for my poor son, God spare him! and for that reason am willing to eat humble-pie and knuckle down to General Crutwell, in the hope of bringing aboot such a match. Now d'ye understand?"

"Oh, surely my grandfather doesn't mean that."

"To be sure he does, Miss Freith; what else can he mean? Read the letter again, and ye'll see."

He pushed it back into my hand excitedly. I read it a second time, and felt that I could not dispute his construction of the offensive passage.

"You will excuse my saying so, Miss Freith, but that's a most unfeeling, coarse, and brutal letter to send to a father at such a time as this, with his poor

son, the object of the insinuation, lying there betwixt life and death. But Athol shall know of it, if it pleases Heaven to restore him—he shall know of it when he is better able to bear such an indignity."

"Oh, no, don't tell him—never tell him, pray."

"Ech, but I certainly will—I must, with all deference to you. Until to-day I am bound to own I thought your grandfather was a gentleman——"

"So he is, Mr. Kelso!" I cried quickly.

"Then all I can say is, he must be under some baneful influence, the influence of some one of vastly inferior moral organisation to his own, but stronger in will—in motive power."

I thought at once of Captain Zollern. I remembered what he had said to me about my innocence of the world, my prospects, and the sacrifice of my interests. Did he know anything of this letter? Could it be possible that he had grafted such an offensive notion from his own to my grandfather's brain? If he had, what was his reason for doing so? What could be the man's motive for interfering in my affairs? *Not* because he liked me; I knew better than that; my instinct told me otherwise. Here, however, the problem was swept from my thoughts by Mr. Kelso's next words.

"And now, Miss Freith," he went on, in a firm but ever kindly manner, "ye must not be astonished at what I am going to say—that after such a further widening of the gulf between our families as has been caused to-day by your grandfather's ill-considered pen, you and I, though I trust we will iver remain friends in the spirit, must continue strangers as we have been up to noo, and put o' one side all that passed between us last night. I will forgive your grandfather—it's our

duty to forgive—but I can niver forget it. As for Athol, I canna, of course, let ye see him any more——"

"Oh, Mr. Kelso!"

"Nay, indeed I canna—ye surely could not expect it—I was wrong to let ye see him last evening; but ye touched me and I gave in; though niver, if I can help it, must ye come together again—niver with my consent or knowledge."

I could not answer him just yet, but my sad, imploring eyes spoke language lips were powerless to express. I stood before him, the embodiment of despair, white and trembling, with fingers convulsively clutched together at my heaving bosom. Gently he unfastened my hands and took one of them, unresisting, into his. That he pitied me with all his soul I well knew, yet he could not unspeak those words; they were just, they were not to be disputed, and no appeal from me in my misery could shake him again. My grandfather had chosen the surest weapon to sever me from my love; had he cut off my clinging arms whilst twined around the neck of my poor feeble boy, he could scarcely have dealt a more effective blow, and by that same blow he had wounded to the quick the pride of this inherently proud Scotchman. Yet, though I was beaten down so hopelessly, my heart rose again with the tenacity of undying love, and I made a last effort of appeal.

"Oh, call back those dreadful words," I cried, "do not pronounce against me so bitterly for what my grandfather has done. I know the mortal offence to your feelings, but you will not visit this on me, you will not surely make me accountable for his doings. I love your dear son far better than my life; what is my unhappy life without him? What would existence be to me in the gloomy atmosphere

of that home without this light of love to relieve it? I say I love him better than my life; to lose him would make that life a living grave; if he died now it would kill me straight and mercifully, but if on earth we are to be for ever parted, it will mean to me a long, long, cruel death!——Oh, hear me, I implore you! I will give up anything, everything for him, though in that I say but little, for the wealth of all the nations multiplied a million times would be as a mite in the scale against my heart. Gladly will I forfeit that wretched inheritance, the insulting mention of which has been thrust between us to-day, and leave Gaunchester-Haugh never to return. Athol has been my sole happiness in that dreary home. I can leave it without a pang of regret so that I know he and I are not to be irrevocably separated. I will go out into the world and work for my livelihood as a governess. I will wait any time for my darling boy, until he has risen in his profession, and can take me to himself, with your consent, and make me happy. Oh, let this be so if you would not kill me. I beseech you do not deny me this hope. Ah, I know you cannot, you will not repulse me now."

The old clergyman was deeply moved by my impassioned, heart-broken appeal. His voice seemed to fail him for a minute, but at length he said:

"My poor child, I do not know how to answer ye. I would not indeed blight your fair young life, or rob ye of a true happiness if I could give it ye. But this that ye ask would not be happiness—it would never be true happiness to ye. The thing is impossible, quite impossible; there are powerful reasons apart from all this which make me say so. Don't ask me to tell you more. You make my heart ache by appealing to me so pitifully, indeed ye do,

but I canna go from my words—I canna, whativer happens. Nay, Mattie, bear up, my dear lass, it is for the best. You will look back upon this era of your life in after time with a philosophy which comes of a riper knowledge of the world, and, maybe, ye will then understand me better. You must be brave in this, my child, and ask God to give ye strength to carry your cross. Have faith in Him, and He will bring ye through the heaviest trials of your life. The crust of this fair earth is choked with the weeds of human sins and human sorrows; all born of woman are born to this inheritance. To those whom God loves most come oftentimes the sorest troubles and afflictions, which are sent as a means to grace, to prove their faith and guide them safely to their heavenly estate."

I listened to him as in a dream. I knew that this was the end, that there was now no hope. His words gradually died away upon my ears, then I heard him utter an exclamation of alarm, and he caught me as I was falling to the ground at his feet in a dead swoon.

When I came to myself I was lying upon a wicker couch under a chestnut-tree on the Rectory lawn, with Mr. Kelso and a maid-servant standing over me. By the aid of burnt feathers and sal volatile they had restored me to consciousness; I heard the old parson's deep voice at my ear begging me to be of good heart—to try to sit up and drink the cup of tea that Martha had brought out for me. I glanced around; the situation puzzled me for a moment, but directly my eyes fell upon Mr. Kelso's anxious face I recalled what had passed, and understood why that sofa had been placed here for me, and why I had not been taken indoors.

Feeling sufficiently recovered, I rose from it. Mr.

Kelso wished to send me home in his carriage, but I declined, assuring him that I was quite able to walk. We did not renew our painful conversation, nor allude to it by a single word. I was too utterly cowed by my wretchedness—crushed and despairing—to trust myself to speak further. I had not the heart to say more to him of my sorrow and my love.

He bid me good-bye most tenderly and feelingly. As I left the lawn I cast one long, burning look at the window of a certain room, and breathed a silent prayer for the dear stricken one lying within. It was my little comfort, my only comfort, that I could pray for him—that I might pray my heart out for him—and no one could say me nay. And at the end of that brief prayer I vowed a solemn vow that none but he or death should be my bridegroom.

CHAPTER XV.

HOW I THROW DOWN THE GAUNTLET AND HAVE TO PICK IT UP AGAIN

On reaching home I went up to my room and shut myself in with my grief, nor did I put in an appearance downstairs again that evening. But after breakfast next morning (at which also I did not appear), I repaired to the General's den to return him Mr. Kelso's letter. That was my ostensible object; but my heart was swelling within me, and beating like the pulse of an express engine. I was armed to the teeth for a pitched battle.

The General was there, but not on his fighting-ground, the hearth-rug; directly I appeared he took up that position.

"Good morning, Mattie."

"Good morning, grandpapa." (We didn't go through the farce of kissing to-day.)

"Not well?"

"Not very."

"Didn't you eat any breakfast?"

"I hadn't the chance."

"How so?"

"No one brought me up any."

"Why didn't you come down?"

"I did not wake in time; I was tired—*upset*," with emphasis.

"Oh! I am sorry to hear that."

"Here is Mr. Kelso's letter, grandpapa." I gave it to him.

"Thank you."

"He writes like a gentleman."

"Of course; he is one."

"You do *not*."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I say *you* do *not*."

"Take care, Mattie."

"I saw your reply to Mr. Kelso."

"Naturally; you went there again on purpose, didn't you?"

"I did; you told me to——"

"I am very glad you went."

"I'm very sorry."

"Ah! was there a falling off, then, in Mr. Kelso's reception?"

"Mr. Kelso did not forget himself nor his position. I say I was sorry to go there and learn how he had been insulted."

"Then did he consider he had been insulted?"

"Certainly he did."

"Nothing but the truth wounds; if he took my hint as a rebuke it proves he deserved it."

"Grandfather, how could you imagine such a thing? Who can have put such an idea into your head?"

"Who but you and Mr. Kelso?"

"No, that we didn't. Somebody else is responsible——"

"Somebody else! I don't understand you. If I am not responsible for my own actions I should like to know who is?"

"I don't think you *are* responsible!"

"What do you mean, Mattie?"

"I mean I don't think you were in this case. At any rate you owe Mr. Kelso an apology, so be good enough to sit down there and write it."

I pointed to his bureau with a forced imperious air, rather stage-timid than effective, I am afraid.

"Ha, ha, ha!" There was quite the croak of the raven in that sardonic laugh. "Well, upon my word, this is something new indeed."

"It is. I think it is time I asserted myself here, instead of allowing others to usurp my place."

"Your place! And what may you consider to be your place, pray?"

"I mean my position as your grandchild—my place in your confidence and regard as one of your own flesh and blood."

"Oh, I see! And have you done nothing to forfeit those privileges, may I ask?"

"No, I have not—that is, I mean—nothing exactly intentional. Of course, what I did the night before last was against your injunctions; but, as you have heard, it was more by accident than design. You might overlook it, I think, especially now——"

"Why now especially?"

"I mean after your letter to Mr. Kelso."

"Which has effectually nipped your new plotting and scheming in the bud, I suppose? Well, far be it from me to contradict a lady; but when you state that you have done nothing of late to forfeit those above-named privileges, except for that *escapade* of the night before last, I regret to say that you tell a distinct falsehood." I had not stated so, but my cheeks grew fiery at his words, for I could not feel altogether innocent. "Ah, you may well redden up. I have said nothing about it hitherto, and so you thought you had escaped detection —you thought I did not know that the very first thing you did on coming back to this house was to revert to

your old system of deceit and disobedience." He paused as if to give more effect to his accusation.

"How, grandpapa?" I asked. I felt bound to say something to fill up the silence, but I knew what he referred to; I remembered now.

"How, indeed!" he cried, his voice growing louder and more grating. "How, but by going to that man's church with Miss La Touche in the very teeth of my prohibition!"

"No, excuse me, grandpapa, you did not actually forbid it; you only said that you would rather we did not go——"

"Psha! Don't try to get behind such a cobweb as that. You went—enough. Then, again, you received at my house shortly afterwards a letter from young Kelso from India!"

Now, how did he find out that? Lola alone knew of it, and of course would not betray me.

"Which letter," he continued, "you told me another falsehood about when you took it out of the bag yourself."

"Pardon me, grandpapa, I——"

"Yes, you did. I recollect it well. It came the same morning that I heard news of—of great importance" (my father's death), "and you said it was from France—from your school——"

"So it was, sir; it was forwarded from there."

"Another paltry subterfuge! I am astonished at you! I am ashamed of you!"

He made no allowances like kind-hearted Mr. Kelso; *he* did not take into consideration how cruelly I was situated, and that out of his own austerity and inexorableness sprang my peccadilloes. I offer no defence

for my petty deceptions; I know I did wrong to deceive him in these small matters, but how could I help it? I was driven on from one thing to another. Had I not resorted to a certain amount of artifice for my love's sake, my life would not have been worth the living. At all events I had broken no more promises; I never had promised that I would give up Athol, and I never would. Nor had I, as my grandfather declared, ever been guilty of a downright lie. I would not stoop so low as that, though he goaded me to the last extremity.

"And so I understand now," the General resumed, "that you have been corresponding with this young man all along. There! don't deny it,"—I had no intention of doing so—"don't perjure yourself further!"

"I will thank you not to use such a word as that to *me*, grandfather," I retorted indignantly; "whatever I may have said or done, I don't deserve that."

"You think not! Well, I will withdraw the expression if you object to it, but in my opinion no other term can be applicable to such prevarication and duplicity as yours. Now, you see, I know more about you, young lady, than you thought for; so when you talk of your rightful position in my house, of your claim to my regard and confidence, consider if you have acted in a way to deserve it."

I said no more; I thought it advisable to strike my colours under the circumstances. My poor little attempt to uphold myself as lady of the house had proved an ignominious failure. I had sunk deeper into his black books than ever, deeper than in the most erratic days of my childhood, and saw no prospect of getting out of them.

The General had evidently kept these guns of his

ready loaded for some time past, and as he ran them up into position, and hurled this avalanche of iron shots upon my devoted head, I fell back discomfited.

"Ah, have I silenced you?" he said triumphantly. "I think I have. That will do, Mattie. We understand each other now."

Thus ended our one-sided battle, and I retired from the field, it must be confessed, in by no means such good order as I entered it.

After these two last interviews of mine, the one with Mr. Kelso, the other with my grandfather, I felt my position to be more hopeless, tantalising, and unhappy than ever.

How shall I describe the remainder of that miserable summer—those weeks of purgatory through which I passed? I cannot attempt to do so in detail; a brief sketch of what happened will be sufficient to connect the chain of events.

I was now debarred, of course, from holding any further communication with the parsonage, and was therefore dependent for news of poor Athol on any chance information I could glean from others. It was a great set-off to my sorrow to learn that he was progressing favourably, so much so, that a fortnight later the doctor, to whom I owed most of my intelligence, had pronounced him well enough to be moved to the seaside, where he strongly advocated his being taken for a change. Although whilst at his home he was so widely separated from me, yet when I knew that he had gone I felt more wretched and lonely than I can express. But there was another reason for this, another reason besides the revived savageness of my grandfather, who, like in days of yore, was now harsh as the edge of a saw, gruff as a hungry raven towards me. I tried in vain to smooth him over at times and get him

to make friends again. Often I pocketed my pride, held my other burning cheek to be smitten (figuratively), and strove to turn away wrath by a soft answer; but it was all of no avail. He repulsed my every overture to peace, trampled my poor little flag of truce into the mud, and received my meek advances in the same gentle manner as a square of British infantry receives a charge of hostile cavalry. Verily he stood before me now as a human *cheval-de-frise*, bristling with sharp retorts, pointed slights, and angry darts from his hawk-like eyes. The mask of hypocrisy, which he had so fitfully adopted, was infinitely preferable to this.

Never again did he allude to that matrimonial suggestion of his in regard to Captain Zollern, probably because he saw that such a project, so far as I was concerned, was utterly hopeless.

But, as I have said, my loneliness and unhappiness at this time arose from yet another cause. A coolness had sprung up between Lola La Touche and myself. Each day I realised the more how totally dissimilar were our tastes and ideas—as wide asunder as the poles. I began to find out that as a matter of fact we had little or nothing in common, and gradually but surely the warm friendship of my school-days congealed under the cold light of experience outside the convent walls. This growing feeling of estrangement arose in my bosom mainly from what I noticed between her and Captain Zollern. It dawned upon me, after further observation of them, that the underlying familiarity which I detected in him towards her was more Lola's fault than his. She was very cautious and furtive, but I saw plainly enough that in her placid, undemonstrative way she encouraged this familiarity. Had he behaved to me as he did to her, even for one single minute, I know I should have re-

pulsed him in a manner that might have astonished him very considerably. I am not speaking from any splenetic feelings against either, though certainly they did their best to wound my *amour propre* at times, by treating me as though I were a perfect child, keeping me outside their conversations, so to say, and displaying that very questionable taste of exchanging low murmured sentences in some foreign tongue when I was present or within hearing. Being once so fond of Lola, I was more disappointed and sorry at all this than actually jealous of the intimacy which had thus developed, to my exclusion. But I did not rally her again about the man, and allowed them to go on in their own way, without saying anything further. One evening, however, I happened to surprise them in a remote corner of the grounds, and caught her actually sitting on his knee, smoking a cigarette; then, indeed, I thought it was time to speak. Still, I did not do so at the moment, and passed on, pretending not to notice them; but afterwards I taxed her with it, and told her what I thought of such a fast and indelicate proceeding. She did not deny it—she could not, but essayed to laugh it off.

"Of course you know I've smoked a cigarette before now," she said—"I've confessed to that; and as to sitting on Captain Zollern's knee, I really couldn't help it. I was standing beside him, and in play he suddenly pulled me down. It must have been just as you came up." Then, seeing that I still looked very grave, she told me that I was a silly little prude, and ought to know more of the world, and not be so squeamish; and finally, when I further remonstrated, gave me a broad hint to mind my own business. Upon this my temper rose, and with it hot words to my lips—the first I had ever addressed to her. Nor was she slow to

retaliate; indeed, the electric change from the smooth, sleepy Lola whom I had hitherto known, to a very virago in looks and speech, took me utterly aback. I little guessed what latent fires lay hid beneath that soft, placid exterior. But the eruption was brief as it was fierce and sudden; the wave of heat having passed, she burst into tears and sobbed out an apology for her violence. Now I had never seen her cry before, and her tears had greater effect upon me than her anger. With all the impulse of my warm nature I threw my arms around her and kissed her, begging in turn to be forgiven for my own explosion. And so we patched it up for the time, but after this *passage d'armes* were never the same to one another again, howbeit a dreadful event later on forced me once more into her arms and made me dependent on her friendship.

A few days subsequent to the departure of Athol and his parents for the seaside, Captain Zollern brought his visit at last to a conclusion; at any rate so I hoped and thought, for he left us rather suddenly one morning, and I did not hear any mention made of his proposed return. But although this rock on which we had split was temporarily removed, I kept very much aloof from Lola out of study hours—studies, by-the-bye, which had been a good deal scamped of late—indeed, had become almost a matter of form—my tutoress preferring to devote as much of her time as possible to the society of our foreign guest.

Hence I was now thrown entirely upon my own resources, and sought solace and companionship with my pets—outdoor pets which I had managed to secure in the better days of grace. These were an old jackdaw and a handsome black retriever. The former, "Jack," was a dear old bird, but a most accomplished thief, a veritable Autolycus; many a little article would he pilfer from my

room through the open window, and hide away in his mysterious haunts; in short, the kleptomaniac feats of this "picker-up of unconsidered trifles" outrivalled those of the renowned magpie in the legend. The latter, "Sam," was my four-footed confidant—more trustworthy than any two-footed one—an intelligent friend, who, with my bay pony "Rollo," shared my secrets, and invariably accompanied me in my solitary rides on that sober little animal about the country lanes. Poor old dog! he was never allowed to be let loose at any other time.

During such rides I brooded gloomily over my lost love and our apparently hopeless case, on my unhappy home, my disappointed friendship, and the dreadful history of my poor mother and father, which constantly crept into my thoughts. These were sad and depressing subjects to fill the mind of a susceptible girl just entered upon the heyday of youth—reflections calculated to convert the most buoyant nature, such as I was blessed with, into a morose and moody disposition. And surely enough, their effect upon me was to make me feel at times prematurely old and utterly weary of my life.

Yet all my sorrows and troubles so far experienced, were but forerunners to the much greater trials still in store for me, and in comparison with them mere "trifles, light as air."

CHAPTER XVI.

NIGHT PROWLERS

And now I come to a most mysterious episode in the history of my home.

I had always heard that Gaunchester-Haugh was haunted—every ancient country house boasts its old-fashioned spectre, or else must confess itself out of the fashion—but I never believed in anything so silly. I had not the smallest faith in ghostly lore. I took after my grandfather in being particularly unsuperstitious and sceptical of things supernatural. *Omnium pestium pestilentissima est superstitio*, as I remember to have heard him often quote when he would laugh to scorn the many ridiculous traditions of old England's stately homes. He used to avow his theory to be the same as Bulwer Lytton's, that the supernatural was the impossible, and that what was called supernatural was only something in the laws of nature of which we had hitherto been ignorant. A common-sense *rationale* this, which might be applied with advantage to all phenomenal occurrences—phenomena which are utterly subversive of belief in the natural order of things. But there are, doubtless, many people who could never be persuaded to accept such a view, who cling to a family legend with perfect faith, engendered more by habit than mental conviction, and much prefer not to be disillusioned. Any attempt to "lay" their ghost for them would be idle; they would look upon such an attempt as an impertinence rather than otherwise. Now this, I am aware, sounds rather like a preamble to some startling story dealing with apparitions and shades of the departed.

but the facts I record, though startling enough, are not without an eventual explanation. To one of the eye-witnesses, however, the mystery was destined never to be revealed.

It was on a sultry evening, I remember, towards the end of August, that I went to bed very early (before dinner, in fact), feeling depressed, ill, and with a racking headache. Thunder had been hanging about all day, and the atmosphere was charged with electricity, but no tempest had broken to clear the air.

I went to sleep on the lightest of repasts, a cup of tea and a piece of dry toast, and in the middle of the night awoke with a decidedly vacuous feeling, but refreshed from my slumber and headache departed. I got up, lit a candle, and looked at the time; it was half-past two. Then I had had nearly seven hours' sleep. The beams of a harvest moon were streaming in through my window curtains, which I opened wider and let in the heavenly light of night. It looked glorious out in the garden, so calm and silvery, and almost like broad day. The thunder-clouds had rolled away since sunset, and not a wisp of vapour intervened between the dark-blue vault above, studded with countless gems, and the moon-washed face of the earth. I always slept with my window open in summer, but Harriet had closed it to-night; as I lifted the sash the distilled essence of a hundred delicious scents rushed to greet me:

> 'Twas midnight—through the lattice, wreathed
> With woodbine, many a perfume breathed
> From plants that wake when others sleep,
> From timid jasmine buds, that keep
> Their odour to themselves all day.

I lingered some time leaning out into the fragrant

night air, thinking, and gazing upon the sleeping flowers beneath, the silver-tipped trees, and the royal illumination of the Angels' Palace glittering above.

Strange but elevating thoughts come to us in the "soft stillness and the night," when we are in perfect silence and alone with the great mystery of nature. Her majestic peace and beauty fill us with wonderment and awe; our thoughts are lifted far above the earth; the prosaic every-day life falls from us, and all the petty customs and ideas of the material world, which form a rampart between ourselves and her great truths, melt into nothingness and vanish from our minds. It is then that a faint perception of the great universal law of God's creation enters into our souls. Fantastic thoughts also come to us in those dead, silent hours; even now, whilst I look out on the garden and flower-beds where the pale beams are playing, I fancy I can see the sleeping flowers move, awake in their earthy beds, and become changed from coloured inanimate forms to hosts of little elves mingling together in high revelry beneath the smiles of their royal mother, the Queen of Night, for

> 'Tis the hour
> That scatters spell on herb and flower.

I have a mind to go out and join them. I am very wide awake, and most unromantically hungry, and feel that to get a biscuit from the dining-room side-board is, at any rate, an imperative necessity. So I slip on my dressing-gown, and go downstairs. Having fortified myself with a large "Captain," I deposit my candle on the hall table and go to the front-door. The shutters are open, I notice, and to my surprise, I find also the door unlocked and unbarred. This is something unusual, but I attribute it to the

fading memory of the antiquated Scroils. I turn the handle softly, and am outside with the sweet, quiet night.

After wandering about the garden and satisfying myself that the flowers are not endowed with life, as they seemed to be from my window, but all still and fast asleep in the glistening light, I turn towards our coniferous labyrinth, the old yew-walks, from the depths of which come now and again the long-drawn vibrations of the night-jar's rattle as he pauses from his moth-hunting to rest among the tree-tops—the only sound that breaks the breathless quiet. Suddenly in front of me a solemn owl swoops silently through the air on velvety pinions, appearing and vanishing in softest flight like a floating phantom.

On the borders of these caliginous regions the green-moulded paths are now tesselated with patches of white, where the moon-rays struggle through the scantier branches, but further in no streak of light can pierce the dense foliage, and all beyond the range of a dozen yards is black as a coal-mine. Though I emulate the cats to-night in my prowling propensity, I cannot, like them, see in the dark, so content myself by walking slowly up and down where the silver spangles strew the ground.

My thoughts are far away from here; they have taken a brief excursion after my heart to romantic little Ilfracombe, on the north Devon coast; there Athol is now, regaining life and strength, I hope, every day. But thought travels quicker than lightning. I am instantly transported back from that rocky shore by the sound of a shuffling tread in the Cimmerian darkness behind me. Now, I have been prone to boast somewhat of my nerves, not that I am at all a phenomenon of courage; but I think any woman of even Boadicean valour might confess to feeling a little startled to hear sudden and

mysterious footsteps at dead of night in that pitch-dark locality. I strain my eyes in the direction whence they seem to come, and presently discern a long gray object gradually looming out of the obscurity and drawing slowly towards me. Now, laugh at me if you will. I do *not* wait to see what it is; neither do I run away, but walk (at a smart pace, certainly) until I am well out upon the moon-lit lawn. I sit down upon the nearest bench, rather breathless and palpitating, and after a few moments venture to turn my head and look back at the path I have just quitted. Ha! there it is, that ghost-like figure, still coming slowly along, as though following me. But I do not move again. I remain where I am, fascinated, watching it. It comes out of the deep shadow, and draws nearer; stops, and stands before me full in the bright moonlight.

It is my grandfather! He is in a dressing-gown of a light material, and sandal slippers, with no covering on his head. He does not appear to have seen me; his eyes are fixed in another direction. His lips are moving—he is muttering something to himself whilst he pauses. After a minute he goes on across the lawn towards the house. My having found the hall-door unfastened is now accounted for. But what in the world is the old man doing rambling about the grounds at this hour of the night, and in that airy garb? He might well have asked me the same question had he seen me. It was very hot; doubtless he had been unable to sleep, and so, like me, had been tempted to join the fairies in their moonlight revels. I looked after him till he reached the house; his figure became lost in its black shade, and I could not tell for certain whether he had gone in or not. If he had, he would naturally fasten up the front-door, and I should again be locked out—this time inadvertently. I waited for a few minutes before I followed him; and when I did so found the door still

undone, so argued that he had not yet concluded his nocturnal wanderings. I felt strongly tempted to draw the bolt after me when I had gone in, and so pay him out in his own coin for the trick he had played me a few weeks since. But I thought better of it, and went upstairs by the light of the moon, for my candle, which I had left burning in the hall, had guttered itself out.

Here another surprise awaited me, but something utterly unaccountable, and therefore far more startling. I had gained the landing where certain of the bedrooms lay, and was tripping softly along the passage to get to my own, when I saw the door of Lola's room at the further end opened slowly, stealthily. The moon, shining through a window of the corridor, fell upon that doorway. It was impossible that I could be under any delusion or mistake. I saw distinctly the figure of a man issue from the room; he was full front to me—I saw his face, smooth and white. It was the face of a stranger. I faltered and paused. He turned to close the door after him, cautiously as he had opened it, and whilst he did so I drew back into a recess at hand, and remained crouching and trembling against the wall. He came down the corridor, and passed close by where I lay concealed in shadow behind an old cabinet in the alcove. I was bewildered and thoroughly frightened. I felt myself quivering like an aspen, the cold dews of deadly fear bursting out upon me. What was it? What mysterious apparition was this, stalking about the house?

I could put no meaning to what I saw. The figure was enveloped in a long black cloak, reaching nearly to the ground, and betraying bare feet, which gleamed in the moonlight, and crept silently past me with the soft, stealthy tread of a panther. With uplifted hair I kept my starting eyes fixed upon it as it approached, and watched till it disappeared down the passage. I was

now petrified with terror, and for several seconds after that ghostly figure had passed out of sight, I could not stir; I felt completely paralysed. Again I asked myself what was it—a phantom, or flesh and blood—that had thus appeared to me? But whatever it might be, of one thing I was certain, that I had seen it coming out of the room occupied by Lola La Touche. At last with an effort I rose from my crouching position, and made a rush down the passage, hunted by that horrible dread of there being something close behind me. I ran to Lola's door, burst it open (it was not locked), and darted into her room. There was a night-light burning, and by its dim rays I could see her lying in bed. She was fast asleep, and breathing heavily. It was selfish, perhaps, to make her share my terror, but I could not resist waking her, and telling her what I had seen.

"Lola! Lola!" I whispered softly in her ear.

She started, and opened her eyes.

"Who's that? Why, Mattie, what is the matter?"

"Oh, Loir, I am so frightened! Have you been sound asleep? Haven't you heard anything moving about?"

"No! Where? When?"

"In here—in your room."

"In my room!" she cried, suddenly sitting up in bed.

"Yes, I saw somebody coming out of it, a minute ago—a man—a strange man!"

"Good gracious, child, what do you mean?"

"I did, I declare I did!"

"Mattie, you're dreaming; go back to bed."

"I am *not* dreaming. I declare to you solemnly I just now saw a man coming out of this room. I was in the passage; the moon is shining strongly through the windows, and I saw him as plainly as if it were day."

"My dear, you terrify me!"

"What in heaven's name does it mean?" I cried. "I tell you I saw this thing—man or spirit; it was no illusion, no dream, it passed within a yard of me as I lay cowering behind that old cabinet outside. I waited till it had vanished, then flew to you. Oh, Lola, what was it? What *could* it have been?"

"Gracious heavens, I don't know," she exclaimed, in the same trembling whisper that I had spoken in, "I have never heard a sound. Oh, my dear Mattie, are you sure it's no fancy?"

"Lola, I vow to you it isn't; do believe me."

"I will believe you, certainly; but——"

"I saw him as distinctly as I see you—far more distinctly by that bright moon."

"But what are you doing out of bed?"

"I woke up and couldn't sleep again, and it's such a lovely night, so I went out into the garden——"

"I never!"

"And there I found the General——"

"Well, you certainly are the most eccentric people——"

"He startled me to begin with, he looked so grim and ghostly, prowling about there by himself——"

"And I suppose when you came indoors you had not recovered, consequently were ready to imagine all sorts of things."

"I see you *don't* believe me," I returned, ruffled at her doubting; "but my grandfather in the flesh, and the creature I saw in that passage, are two very different matters. I am frightened, Lola, terribly frightened. I don't believe in ghosts and spirits, and all such nonsense, but I ask you what was this?"

"My dear Mattie, I am as bewildered as you are. It couldn't have been one of the servants, I suppose?"

"Certainly not," I answered impatiently. "I tell

you I saw the face; it was a perfectly strange face. Let me light a candle."

"Mine is burnt out, I'm afraid; I read myself to sleep——"

"Are there none on the dressing-table?"

"No; I think Harriet has forgotten them." This was part of the parsimony at Gaunchester-Haugh, a speciality of the old housekeeper's, to keep us very short of candles. "Haven't you one in your room?"

"Yes, luckily."

"Then let us go in there, and I'll stay with you. I feel so nervous from what you tell me, I wouldn't be left alone again to-night for anything."

She rose, threw on a wrapper, and went with me to my bedroom, and glad enough I was of her company. It was a case of "any port in a storm" under the circumstances.

The moon illuminated the face of the clock on my mantelpiece. I noticed the time as we entered the room; it was now a quarter past three. I lighted my candle, and locked the door. Scarcely had I done so when a wild, unearthly yell rang through the house, a knell-like cry that made my flesh crawl, and drove back the blood upon its source. We grasped each other by the hand, terror looking through our eyes, our faces white as the dimity hangings of my bedstead.

"Oh, merciful heavens! what was that?" we asked each other, in tremulous whispers, our hearts set thumping loudly against our ribs.

I had heard of the weird cry of the Banshee; in my imagination I likened it to that. It was succeeded by a deep, surging silence, multiplied echoes of the appalling sound seeming to die away upon the ear in whispering waves. All at once the silence was broken again by the boisterous pealing of a shrill bell—a bell kept continuously ringing, as if somebody were in an emergency and calling

for help That sound, too, died away, and once more the house was quiet.

"Oh, Lola, what is all this?" came in a gasp from my pale lips.

"Somebody must be ill or hurt," she answered. "Can it be your grandfather? Had he come in when you did?"

"No, I don't think so; but that was no human voice, surely."

"Hush! listen!"

We heard nothing more until two or three minutes had passed, when, with startling suddenness, the bell crashed out in another furious peal.

"There! again! Oh, good heavens!" I cried, in a trembling whisper.

"I do believe something has happened to your grandfather," exclaimed Lola. "What shall we do? Surely that bell must have roused the servants."

"I had better go and see if Harriet is up," I said; "but I dare not go alone. Will you come with me?"

"Of course; I wouldn't let you go by yourself"

Then together we left the room, to make our way to the servants' dormitories; but, as we were crossing the landing at the head of the main staircase, the sound of talking below caused us to pause and listen. We heard my grandfather's voice raised to a pitch of anger or excitement.

"He is in this house *now*, I tell you!" were his breathlessly spoken words. "I came right upon him. He almost touched me."

"No, no, sir," remonstrated a voice in a lower key, which I distinguished as that of Scroils. "You've been asleep, sir—you've been walkin' in your sleep, as you've done before now, and you've had the nightmare."

Walking in his sleep! Ah, then perhaps that is how I had seen him out in the garden.

"Confound it, don't contradict me, you fool—I *wasn't* asleep!" he exclaimed in reply, speaking still more excitedly. "He's here, I say; he's hiding somewhere about—the man himself!"

"It can't be, sir, he's dead; you know that; if you've seen anything, you've seen his ghost."

I turned quickly to exchange a glance with Lola, and caught a sudden gleam of intelligence, a smile, lighting up her features; but her face changed instantly as our eyes met. I had caught that look, however; it rather perplexed me.

"Did you hear that, Lola?" I whispered. "He has seen something, too."

She held up a finger to hush me.

"Ghost!" exclaimed my grandfather. "Don't talk to me of such rubbish! That fellow is alive, I tell you—and lurking about in this house—waiting to murder me! Search every room! Call everybody up! I will have him dragged out and sent to the police-station this instant."

The talking ceased. A light gleamed in the entrance-hall, and we heard them coming upstairs.

"Let us go back, Mattie," murmured Lola; "it's nothing. I understand it now. Your grandfather has been walking in his sleep, and something has wakened and startled him. That was the extraordinary noise we heard, no doubt—the cry of a somnambulist suddenly roused. It's quite dangerous to wake them like that, you know."

This might be so; but I did not know what to think. I lingered at the head of the stairs while my grandfather and Scroils were coming up.

"What *is* the matter, grandpapa?" I asked, as he reached the landing.

"Eh? who's that? Mattie!—Nothing! nothing's the matter; go back to your room at once," was the sharp reply.

"But I have something to tell you, grandpapa——" I began.

"Come along, dear," whispered Lola suddenly, and pulling me by the hand; "don't frighten the old man any more."

"What! what! what!" cried the General, the words sounding like the explosion of three percussion caps. "Something to tell me! What?"

"I heard you and Scroils talking downstairs," I said, "and——"

"What business had you to listen, then? What brings you out here—both of you?" looking at Lola.

"That bell, sir—it alarmed us naturally," she explained.

"Well, be good enough to retire again at once. There is nothing to be alarmed about, nothing at all."

"But I have seen something to-night, too, grandpapa," I persisted. He started and glared at me inquiringly. "I could not help overhearing what you said to Scroils, and I have seen what you did, I believe—a ghostly figure creeping about the house just now."

"What! Where? where?"

"In that passage, she says," interposed Lola, pointing to it; "but she went to bed feverish and unwell last night, and I really think it is all some extraordinary fancy——"

"Do you? Then I don't," I asserted stoutly.

"But what were you doing in that passage, Mattie?" asked the General.

"I awoke restless, and got up and walked about," I answered; "I was out in the garden and met you, but you didn't notice me."

"You met *me* out in the garden?"

"Yes, you were staring straight in front of you. You were in your sleep, I believe." I ventured this on the strength of what I had heard.

"Eh! um—um!" My grandfather appeared bothered. Suddenly he turned to Lola and asked: "*You* saw nothing, mademoiselle?"

"Nothing, sir. Mattie came to my room, roused me out of my sleep, and told me she had just met a strange man stalking through the house——"

"And saw him coming out of your door," I threw in.

"Eh, queer, very queer," muttered the General; "but that's not likely. Are you quite sure you really saw anything, Mattie?"

"Quite, grandfather. *I* was wide awake enough."

"Um—well—perhaps you did; perhaps this old house, then, *is* haunted after all."

"So *I* think now, sir," observed Scroils.

"*You* think so, eh, Scroils? Then we'll try if we can't lay the ghost"—to us, "that'll do"—always his closing words. At the same time he turned to the butler and added in an undertone, which I just caught, "Go for the police at once, d'ye hear?" But Scroils shook his head significantly, and taking him apart growled something in a low, earnest tone. The General bent down his tall figure to listen.

"Ah, yes, to be sure, quite right," he mumbled in reply, rising again erect. "I forgot—thank goodness he *is* on the spot. Mattie, go to bed, and don't go prowling about any more at night! As you suggest, Miss La Touche, it must be some delusion of hers—no doubt it is. I am foolish to have listened to such nonsense for a moment, but—ar—I merely wanted to hear what she had to say. That'll do, that'll do, good night."

And so he dismissed us, and we retired to our respective rooms. But though Lola appeared to be satisfied, I was not. There was some extraordinary mystery brooding over the place, and I scented danger in the air.

CHAPTER XVII.

HOW THE GENERAL REVIVES AN OLD ENTERTAINMENT FOR MY BENEFIT

I TOOK it well out in my pillow, as I invariably did after an irregular night's rest, and when I at length opened my eyes they fell upon the clock, which told me it was past eleven.

The first sound I heard on awaking, was the crunching of carriage-wheels on the gravel drive. I jumped from my bed and looked out of window, and saw our shabby old shandredan rolling away from the house. Who was in it, and where was it off to? Perhaps my grandfather was going into Kellingsby. If so, it was rather unusual, though not improbable. Somebody, I observed, had closed my window since I went back to bed. It was a lovely morning; I panted for the fresh air, and tried to raise the sash, but found it immovable. It was fastened in some other way than by the latch. On looking I discovered, to my utter surprise, several large screws on the outside riveting the framework to the casement. What on earth did this mean? A strange feeling came over me directly I saw those screws. I rushed across the room to the door. The key was gone—the door locked! Now what new eccentricity was this? Who had caged me up like this, as if I were a wild beast? My grandfather, of course; but why? I rang the bell violently, and nearly pulled down the bell-rope in my sudden ebullition of feelings; but I had to ring for a quarter of an hour before anybody answered. At last I heard steps, then a knock.

"Come in," I cried, in a quiet tone, rather different

from my summons. I expected the door to be unfastened at once, and to see Harriet enter. But no; she merely asked from without:

"Did you please to want anything, Miss Mattie?"

"Yes. Kindly undo that door, Harriet, will you? Somebody's left the key outside."

I pretended to ignore the undignified fact that I was locked into my room as in the days of my childhood, but I knew very well that it was so.

"Would you like me to bring you up some breakfast, Miss Mattie?" was Harriet's evasive reply, and still she kept the door closed between us. "Or will you just have a cup of tea and wait till luncheon?"

"I should like you to open that door, if you please," I said, with forced calmness. "Why is it locked, pray, on that side, and why is my window screwed down?"

"I can't explain to you, miss, but you'll know all about it in good time."

"Open my door at once, I desire you! Am I a child, to be treated in this fashion? What does it all mean?"

"*I* can't help it, miss. It's master's orders."

"I should think I know *that!* No one else would dare to do it, I fancy!" There was much haughty temper in my voice now.

"If you'll allow me, Miss Mattie," said Harriet meekly, "I'll bring you up some breakfast at once;" and I heard her going away.

I called after her, and again ordered her to unlock the door, but she paid no attention.

I was highly incensed and excited, but tried to think quietly—to understand the meaning of this last strange proceeding of my grandfather's. That it had something to do with the occurrences during the night, I felt assured; what, was to me incomprehensible.

Presently Harriet returned and asked, if she undid the door, whether I would kindly take the tray in from her hands?

"Good gracious!" I exclaimed angrily. "What do you mean? Don't be so absurd, Harriet! Bring it in yourself. The idea!"

After some hesitation, she turned the lock and entered. Then in a moment, sinking my dignity, I made a rush for the open door. But she was too quick for me. Hastily setting down the tray, and spilling half the things on it, she caught hold of my arms, and a most unseemly struggle ensued.

"Now, Miss Mattie, don't be violent! I beg of you not to be violent," she remonstrated, firmly holding on. Though an old woman, she was strong, and I could not get away.

"Let me go, Harriet!" I cried, thoroughly roused. "How dare you behave like this to me? Let me go, I say!"

"Indeed, miss, I cannot. Don't be angry with me—it isn't my fault—it's the General's orders."

"But what's the matter? What in the world have I done?"

"I don't know, miss; I don't know nothing at all about it."

"You do, Harriet! You must surely know what my grandfather means by——"

"Indeed I don't, Miss Mattie—pray believe me."

"Does Miss La Touche know?"

"I dare say she does, but really I can't tell you——"

"Ask her to come to me, please."

"Very well, miss."

"No, no, don't," I added, on second thoughts; "she can come of her own accord if she chooses." I had

ceased to struggle now, finding it useless, and allowed the old housekeeper to guard the door like a griffin without further dispute. "Has the General gone anywhere?" I asked.

"Not that I know of, miss."

"Who was that drove off just now in the shandredan?"

"I didn't see no one, miss. Perhaps it's gone to meet somebody."

"Oh, then, I shall find my grandfather in his study, I suppose. Now look here, Harriet, let me out directly, and don't be idiotic." I assumed a coaxing tone at last. "Never mind the General's orders—I'll make it all right with him—I'll go down at once and see him." I thought to myself, I would indeed, and rather astonish him.

"I dare not, Miss Mattie; indeed I daren't. It's more than my place is worth, after what the master said to me."

"And what did he say?"

"Well, miss, that you was to be kep' up here till he gave other instructions, and on no accounts to be let out of this room."

"Upon my word, it's almost too ridiculous to be angry about, but I am not going to stand this sort of nonsense nowadays—it was bad enough when I was a little girl."

"Yes; but this ain't quite the same thing, Miss Mattie," argued Harriet, with a grim smile; "this ain't bread and water, ye see."

I was in no humour to smile with her, or to observe the distinction she pointed out.

"My grandfather is mad! I am sure he is mad!" I exclaimed, with renewed exasperation. "I'll just write a note, and I will thank you to take it at once to your master," I added authoritatively.

"Certainly, Miss Mattie; but you might speak more civil to a body. *I'm* not in fault for this."

"Aren't you? It's my belief you are all in it—one as bad as the other." I muttered this to myself as I went to the writing-table, where I scribbled an indignant line to my autocratic grandfather, and asked him what in the name of all that was reasonable and civilised he meant by this unwarrantable conduct, and, moreover, how he dared to give his servants instructions to treat me with insolence and keep me in confinement?

It was not a note likely to soften the old curmudgeon, but I didn't care about that; I only hoped it might have the effect of bringing him up to my prison, when I could have it out with him comfortably, for I felt as wild and pugnacious, deprived of my liberty, as a tigress robbed of her young. I had not the least fear of him on this occasion. I was an aggrieved, an outraged young person, and he was utterly in the wrong, I was quite sure, whatever his reason might prove to be.

Harriet took my note down to him, but he paid no regard to it, and did not come near me. Nor did Lola. For three days and nights I was kept cooped up in that hot room, without a breath of fresh air—window and door both securely fastened—and this in the dog-days. It was enough to drive me mad; I wonder it didn't. Only Harriet came near my room during those three days, to bring me my meals and perform the usual housemaid's offices. After my first attempt to slip past her she was on her guard in case I should try again, but I did not. I would not degrade myself further by attempting to force my escape, even if I could have done so; but it was out of the question. I might have made another exit by the window, but that the screws fairly baffled me. Besides, there was no Athol underneath to catch me now.

The old woman became more grim and uncommunicative

each visit; I gave up asking her questions, and scarcely spoke to her at all.

My stormy sentiments and resolves during that broiling incarceration I need not enlarge upon. I vowed to do all sorts of desperate things as soon as I could get out, just as I used to vow when a poor ballyragged and rebellious little child; but my most extravagant intentions fell far short of what Fate had ordained should actually occur.

At length my durance came to an end. I had completed, it seemed, my term of imprisonment according to the old despot's decree, and on the fourth day, shortly before the luncheon hour, Harriet came upstairs, undid the door, and ostentatiously threw it wide open, observing, with a stony smile: "By the General's orders, miss;" then left it so, turned on her heel, and went downstairs again.

I paused for a moment on the threshold of my room as a captive bird does when its cage-door is opened for it to fly away; then I darted out, and rushed headlong down the stairs to my grandfather's study. I was bursting with indignation, and dying to give vent to my pent-up fury. He was not there. Perhaps he anticipated my visit, and thought better to avoid it until the first tornado of my wrath had expended itself on the open air. But I was after him like a young bloodhound, and quickly hunted him down in the grounds. He looked at me as I approached, with a hard, immovable face.

There were no ceremonious greetings, no wasted civilities between us. I was eager for the fray, and went at him without any sparring.

"Now, sir," I cried, with white lips and heaving chest, "what do you mean by this? What crazy whim is this? By what right do you treat me, a lady, a

defenceless woman in your house, in this brutal, cowardly manner?"

"Come, come, no strong language, if you please," he replied coolly; "of course, I can understand your feeling a little excited and—ar—disappointed at not being able to get out of your room before. That's only natural under the circumstances—ehem—but now that you *are* out, of course you can do what you like, and go where you like."

"I can, and I will—that I will!"

"Yes, I am quite aware of it." There was a cold, cruel smile upon his face, a smile he seemed to have caught from his Hungarian friend.

"But first of all, sir," I said, "I insist upon an explanation. Why have you done this to me?"

"*I* need not tell you if you consult your own conscience."

"My own conscience! What has that to do with it?"

"Not much, perhaps."

"Nor has yours, I should think. You can have neither conscience nor natural feelings to treat your own grand-daughter in this inhuman fashion, and for no earthly reason——"

"Oh, yes, a very good reason."

"What?"

"We need not repeat ourselves. I have said I leave it to your conscience to enlighten you."

Now, what on earth did he suspect me of?

"I tell you, grandfather, I have done nothing to reproach myself about, nothing whatever. *You* can't say that! You ought to be heartily ashamed of yourself to degrade me, a grown-up woman, and a lady of your own blood, in such a manner—making me, by your

malicious caprices, or innate cruelty—I'm sure I don't know which—a butt and laughing-stock for your servants. This is no home to me—I loathe it—I am utterly miserable in this house—give me money and let me go away." As I said this, I saw him start, and a strange look pass over his face. "I can teach, or go upon the stage," I continued impetuously—"anything rather than live on in this wretched state of purgatory. Ah, grandfather, some day you will regret your unkindness and cruelty to me. You will be punished for it, indeed—indeed you will. Remember, all you do down here is witnessed above—my poor dead mother can see you now—her eyes are upon us at this moment, and——"

"Hush, child!" he cried, throwing out his hand at me, "don't dare to drag the sacred name of the dead into such an altercation as this—don't speak to *me* of your mother, as if——"

"But I *will* speak of her! As her child, I appeal to your better feelings through her memory—to a father's love for his own daughter, if he has none for hers——"

"Not another word! Such an appeal at such a time is a gross sacrilege. Hardened and defiant though you are, I marvel at your daring to take the name of the dead in vain—in protest against me whom you have so wronged——"

"How have I wronged you?" I asked quickly. "What harm have I done beyond loving where you do not approve?—and I cannot help my love. I marvel much more, grandfather, at your daring to provoke the dead by unnatural persecution of the living; at your daring to ill-treat and abuse me, the child of your poor lost daughter. I wonder you are not afraid that my mother should rise in anger out of her grave

yonder" (I pointed in the direction of the tomb; again he started, and his lurid eyes fell before mine) —"that she should come upon you, and curse you for all this!"

"Silence, Mattie!" He uttered the words in a somewhat more subdued tone.

I obeyed him for the moment; I saw his lips working convulsively, and I thought he might say something after all—in explanation, or regret for his unprovoked conduct. But knowing his immalleable nature so well, I need not have expected it. He was the less likely to yield or soften before the fierce and dauntless spirit I displayed.

"Who told you that was your mother's grave?" he asked.

I suddenly remembered that I had betrayed a confidence, though inadvertently, but felt the less compunction since the confider had only imparted what he had himself betrayed.

"I know that it is; that's sufficient. I have known it for a long time" (from the Rectory, he would probably conjecture), "and also more than you imagine of the sad, dreadful past which it pains me to think about, much less speak."

"Ah! your friends have been at work, I see," he replied, with a lowering look. "Well, whatever you may have heard from prattling fools, they did not prove their friendship by telling you"—he meant the Kelsos, of course; I did not trouble myself then to disabuse his mind—"whether they have told you the truth or not. However, I decline to enter into that, especially at this moment."

"Nor do I wish to talk of it, grandfather. All I want to know now from *you* is why I have been subjected to this last indignity?"

"And I have referred you to the best authority for an answer. That will do! Don't stand there any longer trying to browbeat me and brazen it out. I will not listen to you."

"I expected no less," I cried. "You subject me to a wanton outrage—an act of cruel oppression, as unprovoked as senseless; you know yourself to be in the wrong, and yet you refuse to acknowledge it or to express the slightest regret. I expected nothing else."

"That will do! that will do!" and repeating those winding-up words he turned from me abruptly and walked away.

"You are mad! you must be mad!" I cried out after him in the height of my exasperation; "there is no other excuse for you! Or you have come down to the level of the man whom you have lately made your friend; you have deteriorated into a barbarian, and have lost all pretensions to a gentleman!"

He did not heed this Parthian shot, though he must have heard it; my wordy darts fell off him harmless as sand off a rhinoceros. With no particle of love for me left in his heart, as I fully believed, why should he care for my reproaches? He was impervious; he treated me with indifference and contempt. I felt that the unnatural gulf between us could never again be bridged over by even a temporary structure.

Except for the bald satisfaction of having told him my mind, I had gained nothing by the interview. I was as much in the dark as ever as to the real cause of this last act of persecution. It was inscrutable, mysterious. Yet that I had done something heinous in his sight to bring it about, his retorts implied; and I continued to associate my imagined offence, whatever it

might be, with the incidents of that ghostly night. So far, as it proved, I was right.

The luncheon-gong was humming through the house as my grandfather walked away from me towards it, but I was much too angry and excited to think of eating. I felt impelled to go for a long walk to relieve my feelings, and started at a swinging pace down to the river, as though it had been icy January instead of fervid August.

It was a very lovely afternoon; the ripe earth held in her lap the full perfection of the year, like a golden flower in the extreme pride of its glory; but soon, too soon, to change and fade, so surely does devastating decay follow in the wake of all that is fairest and most beautiful.

On reaching the water-side, I changed my mind and took out the boat. A row down under the well-shaded banks of the Furion was preferable to a walk. I pulled along at a smart stroke until I was tired, then turned up a little creek which buried itself in the thickest and most picturesque part of the woods, and fastening my boat's head to the long reeds, jumped out.

Like a hunted deer who plunges into the recesses of the forest to hide from its foes, I dive into these cool, peaceful depths, the sweetest haven of refuge, to try to get away from my troubles—to elude them just for one brief, reposeful hour. But though the deer may shake off its persecutors at the borders, I cannot mine; they follow me with the tenacity of sleuth-hounds—my unhappy thoughts—into the uttermost nook I may seek. I am indeed terribly unhappy, from many causes, and a feeling of hopelessness and despair would soon take entire possession of me but that I fight so strongly

against it. I was too proud and tempestuous to shed a tear in the presence of that granite column, the General but now, hidden from all eyes save those of the dove or squirrel, I can bemoan my forlorn and isolated position without constraint, I can give myself up to the luxury of a downright good cry; and I bury my feverish face in the cool, soft moss at the foot of a fatherly oak, and sob to my heart's content.

There are some miseries over which one may weep aloud with deep self-pity, and there are others that can find no such relief, but must be carried about in the bosom—a fiery cross, to sear and burn into the bleeding heart.

Happily for me, mine was a sorrow over which I might lament without shame.

Old Burton sings:

> All my joys to this are folly,
> Naught so sweet as melancholy—

and I could indulge the "luxury of woe," and feel that I was thoroughly entitled to my tears For, apart from the supreme wretchedness of a homeless home, what more legitimate grievance could a woman have than mine—to be doubly denied by Fate her sole hope and comfort in the world, the man she loved? Yes, I think I was entitled to my tears.

Do people ever die for love? I trow not. It is looked upon as a highly poetical thing to do, and certainly it is far easier than to *live* for love; but no healthy man nor woman dies for it, I am convinced, unless he or she commits suicide, or deliberately *tries* to die. In that case it must be either from weakness or vice, for it is a poor creature, a small-minded nature, that, possessed perhaps of many talents, deems life not worth

the living because that one wish, that one desideratum, is left ungratified. No, before it breaks, the heart must have something more than mere pain to bear; disgrace and shame may kill, they do kill, but simple suffering never. Yet there are people who die of broken hearts, we know—that is, they allow their misery to become a wasting disease, they refuse with morbid, dogged obstinacy to think of anything else, and so woo the canker to eat into their souls. Thus mental and physical powers gradually fail from want of healthy exercise, heart and mind are self-consumed on the starving diet of repinings monotonous and never-ending. It is at the fountain, surely, that the silver bowl is broken. There is an ancient Persian proverb which says, "It is better to kneel than to stand, it is better to sit than to kneel, it is better to lie than to sit, and it is better to be dead than lying." Methinks the perpetrator of that proverb was but a chicken-hearted thing who, like a stubborn mule, lay down under his burden and refused to bear it. What could be more ignoble than the desire to rust away in sleep when we ought to be up and doing, and fighting on for ourselves with the weapons of life which have been vouchsafed to us for that purpose?

Now, though I am weeping so bitterly and bedewing my mossy pillow with passionate tears, I have no thought of giving in. It is an intense relief to open the sluice-gates of my surcharged heart, but in its flooded soil are planted deep the perennials of constancy and fixedness of purpose.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A FATAL GAGE D'AMOUR

. . . They gazed upon each other
With swimming looks of speechless tenderness,
Which mix'd all feelings—friend, child, lover, brother,
All that the best can mingle and express
When two pure hearts are pour'd in one another,
And love too much, and yet can not love less;
But almost sanctify the sweet excess
By the immortal wish and power to bless.

. . . . . .

Mix'd in each other's arms, and heart to heart,
Why did they not then die?—they had lived too long
Should an hour come to bid them breathe apart.

I WAS like a child exhausted by a paroxysm of fiercest grief, as, prostrate and sobbing, it lies in its little cot, each sob taking it further from the ugly bogie of its trouble, and nearer to the bright fairies of dreamland. But I did not sleep; *my* sobs, which broke from me at intervals and convulsed my whole frame, kept me fully awake and in presence of my grief. I lay for a long time in the same position, my face half hidden in the moss, and turned towards the gnarled trunk of the venerable oak. I called out my lover's name again and again; the passionate utterance of that dear name seemed to give me comfort. I was answered by a wood-pigeon perched overhead in the thick boughs, whose soft, sympathetic note fell soothingly upon my ear in my solitude and sorrow.

But by-and-by—it may have been nearly an hour

after I threw myself down under the tree—another answer came to me.

"Athol! oh, Athol!" I cried out once more, in abject despair; and I heard his voice distinctly say:

"My own little Mattie! I am here—look up, dear!"

But I would not, to be disappointed. I knew how overwrought imagination fools the ear, and though those words sounded so real, yet I took them for the echoes of my brain. His voice might ring in my ears, but his presence, I knew, could not gladden my eyes; he was far away from me at that moment. I only pressed my face deeper in the moss, petulant at this trick of fancy, and murmured to the ground:

"Oh, my heart, my heart is breaking! Oh, Athol, only to pour out my soul to you now! I had none but you in the whole world—and you they have taken from me!"

"No, darling, they have not—they cannot—you have me still, Mattie—look at me, dear one!"

This time I felt a gentle touch on my arm—then warm lips upon my cheek, and I did look up.

He *was* there! Oh joy! it *was* Athol—leaning over me! My ears had told me truth. I sprang to my feet with a great cry, almost a scream of mingled delight and amazement, and in that second I was where I had pined to be for so long, clasped to his heart, the cry upon my lips stifled by his burning kisses. At first I could only moan out on his bosom, in a fresh flood of tears:

"Oh, Athol, take me away, take me away! I am dying of my wretchedness—save me, darling!"

"My poor love! What has happened?" he asked tenderly. "But you shall tell me presently."

"Oh, how is this?" I exclaimed, when I could speak again.

"I was fishing, and saw the boat. I was at that

moment thinking how I should communicate with you when I saw it, and I guessed you were here."

"But when did you come back?"

"The day before yesterday. I thought you would know."

Ah, now I understood my imprisonment, or imagined that I did (I was very far out in that imagining), but I did not tell him about it yet.

"Oh, let me look at you, Athol!" I exclaimed, drawing back my eager face to gaze up into his. "Then you are well again! Thank God! thank God!"

"Thank God, indeed!" he exclaimed fervently. "Surely I have been spared for this end—for *you*, my own true, constant love!" I nestled still closer to him as he said this, and we exchanged a sacred kiss. "Yes, let us have faith, my Mattie," he said, "faith in each other through all as we put faith in God, and He will give us our hearts' desire, and bring it to pass."

"May it be so indeed, dear!" I murmured. "Heaven only grant it may be so!"

A brief silence followed our earnest words. At length I said: "Oh, I have so much to tell you, Athol. I do not know how I have lived since you went away; I have passed such a weary, weary time. 'A sorrow shared is only half a sorrow,' but I have none there to sympathise with me."

"Ah, I feared you would be unhappy and restless, my poor darling; and you endure all for my sake—all for love of me——"

"It is a sweet martyrdom," I whispered, "I would bear much more for *you*."

His eyes thanked me without words.

"But have you been ill, dear?" he asked, fondling my pale cheek; "you look so white."

"Not ill, but no wonder I look so," I answered, and then I told him how I had been interned for the last three days, and how I supposed my grandfather knew that they had come back from Ilfracombe, and that this was why it had been done—as a sort of warning to me.

"But I don't understand that quite," Athol rejoined, "for it seems he locked you in the day before we returned, and he could not possibly have known we were coming, for nobody did. So it was not for that, I think."

"Well, if not, it's the more mysterious, and none the less cruel," I said. "Oh, I cannot remain at Gaunchester-Haugh any longer, Athol—I will not burlesque the name of home by calling it that—I am so utterly miserable there; now more than ever, since what has happened lately—I mean this fresh cause of—oh, but perhaps you don't know," I added suddenly, with a hopeful thought that Mr. Kelso might not have told him of my grandfather's insult.

"I think I do, dearest. You mean about that letter of the General's to my father where he explains that you are by no means the eligible person we all thought you were. Really, that's a great pity, a great disappointment—especially to *me*."

He was laughing now, but I looked very grave.

"Surely, dear, it is too serious a matter to be treated lightly," I said; "your father was furious when he got that letter."

"I know he was, but I hope he does not think so much of it now. I fancy I have talked him out of his indignation a little since he showed me your grandfather's note."

"Ah, if you have, I am very thankful, for that last visit of mine to the Rectory was a bitter one indeed to

me. I found your father brooding over the insult he had just received, and in face of that horrid letter he said words to me that drove the last vestige of hope from my heart, and left me in utter despair. I was possessed with a wild fever of agony at the thought of losing you for ever, for then the threatening danger was twofold, as you know; but God has been most merciful; all my other troubles give way at this moment to thankful joy for your recovery."

Athol pressed my hand in reverent silence; there was a long pause, then he said:

"That I have met you once more to-day, Mattie, I must tell my father when I return. He will be vexed, angry, but I could not help it. Wild horses could not have kept me back from you to-day; when I saw the little boat my heart leapt, for I knew that you were near, and I searched through the wood—to find you in this sadness and tears."

He kissed me again, and I smiled up into his face through the rainbows of my swimming eyes.

"I love your dear old father, Athol," I said presently, "for his sake as for yours. He is so kind and good, and—and I thought he seemed to like me——"

"He does, dearest; how could he help it? He is very fond of you indeed, as I know, but he is a strange old man about—about some things; and I must tell you the truth, that even if he and your grandfather could be brought to bury the hatchet—if their ancient quarrel could be healed up for ever, the cause remains, and in my father's eyes is an insuperable obstacle to any engagement between you and me."

"But why, Athol? What *is* the cause? I have never known. I have always looked upon the old feud as history, and have accepted the fact in ignorance of the

origin; but I remember in one of the interviews I had with your father, he told me, when I asked him, that it was better I should remain in ignorance. What did he mean? What *is* that cause, Athol? Do you know?"

"Well, yes, I know this much—that it was on some Church matter they quarrelled; a fierce religious dispute arose between them soon after my father came to Chepslow."

"And is that all?"

"I can't tell you any more than that——"

"But I don't understand. Why should Mr. Kelso think it better *I* shouldn't know?" I pressed him still, not feeling satisfied.

"Well, I suppose he didn't consider it reflected very creditably on your grandfather——"

"And so visits that sin upon me—puts forward that old rust-eaten offence as an impediment to our happiness. It is very hard. I can scarcely believe that of your father. It seems anomalous, quite a paradox, that he should be so kind and yet so unjust."

"He is bigoted, I confess, on religious matters; I cannot defend him in that," answered Athol; "nor can I overrule him by any argument of mine. In spite of all I can say, and of his really liking you so much—independently, too, of your grandfather—he thinks it better that we should be kept apart, better for us both. In fact, he would make it imperative on me, and, as I have said, this meeting will get me into hot water."

"I'm so sorry, dear."

"Oh, never mind, Mat. How often have *you* got into hot water for *me!* But now, my darling, we must be patient; we must wait and hope. Perhaps my father will give in at last. I trust he may when he sees that

we are both in earnest. But if not—well, remember, I am of age and my own master, with a profession; and though I would not act against him if I could possibly help it, for he is a dear, good father, yet I cannot allow his obstinate prejudices and confined views to stand between me and the woman I love."

Oh, those dear words! What sweet melody they were to me—how I hugged them to my heart! And, alas! I might well make the most of my fleeting joy; I little guessed what new and awful trouble dogged its heels, what bitterness and deadly peril lurked behind. As I stood there, clasped in Athol's arms, happy again and hopeful, filled with a fresh, delicious hope, like the world feels at springtime, I could not see the great darkness which was fast descending upon me. Could I have seen it, oh, how I should have clung to my soldier-love! How that first impulsive cry would have appealed to him now in thrilling terror and with ten-fold force, "Oh, take me away, take me away!" But, all blissfully unconscious of the gathering tempest, I basked there in the sunshine of that transient gladness.

We lingered so for a while, then by-and-by wandered together through the sombre depths of the silent woods, with an arm around each other's waist, as we used to do when boy and girl. And we talked of that time and of the future—of the supreme happiness that we hoped and believed to be in store for us. It was a beautiful picture; we painted with prodigal hands, and covered our canvas with a harmony of brightest colours. Then from the poetry of the future we drifted back into the prose of the present, for I had so much to say to him of all that had happened of late.

Briefly I told him everything, from the dramatic entrance on the scene of this Hungarian stranger down

to the mysterious incidents of that haunted night, from which dated my imprisonment.

Athol looked very grave and perplexed when he heard all. In that *aperçu* was, of course, included the sad history of my father and mother, as I had learnt it from Captain Zollern, and which I felt bound to communicate to my lover. It was this story of my parents that appeared to perplex him more than anything else, more even than my account of the apparition I had seen; that he attributed, I think, in spite of all I could say, to my heated imagination, as others had done. But the whole circumstances were so mysterious and inexplicable, he could not attempt to explain them away.

"And this foreign gentleman," he observed, "this new-made confidant of your grandfather, told you all that?"

"He did, just as I have repeated it."

"And he never knew your mother, you say?"

"No, only my father; but from the interest he seemed to take in her tomb, I thought he *had* known her."

"Perhaps he did; there's no telling." A pause. "And so he advised you to throw me over, to make sure of your grandfather's money?"

"Yes; as if I would listen to such advice, particularly from *him*, and given in such a way as it was! He knew that; he only offered it to try me, and then, no doubt, reported on his experiment to my grandfather."

"And when did he go?"

"Just after you left for Ilfracombe. Thank goodness he *has* gone. I only hope he will never come back. I abhor the man, Athol; he is not a gentleman, and he is *bad*. My instinct tells me so."

"Probably your instinct does not err."

"A liar, too, and treacherous. He is no friend to me, I am very sure."

"I think not, from what you tell me. My poor dear love, your life indeed is anything but enviable in that gloomy old house, living, as you seem to be, in an atmosphere of mystery and deceit."

"It has been dreadful for me ever since you went away," I said.

"And you also doubt this French young lady, this Miss La Touche?"

"Yes, I do now. I am bitterly disappointed in her. I did look upon her as my friend; now I cannot. She too is under the influence of that odious man, and I have suspected her more than once lately of carrying on an intrigue with him—against *us;* why, I don't know. I really believe, if it hadn't been for these people, I might have won my old grandfather over to our cause in the end, for he was much nicer to me when I first came home. But it's no use talking of that now. At any rate, Lola has behaved horridly—and, fancy, never once came near me the whole time I was locked in my room. Oh, you cannot imagine what I have had to go through! I tell you, Athol, I *can't* live there any longer. But for you I couldn't endure to stay there for another day——"

"Nor would I advocate your staying, even for my sake, if you had any nice friends to go to; but I also would not advocate your quarrelling openly with your grandfather. Why should you punish your dear self, and give him an excuse to cut you out of his will? Wait and hope—there, there's a piece of mercenary advice for you! If the old man could only hear that!" —laughing—"wouldn't he glory, and write it off as justification for his insult to my father!"

"That he would!"

We were now on the skirts of the covert, and standing beside the river. The glowing sun warned us of the time; it was late; the afternoon was gone.

"I must be getting home, darling, and so must you," said Athol. "Shall I row you back? I will—at any rate, part of the way. I left my rod and tackle by your boat."

"But do you think we had better go together?" I said hesitatingly.

"Well, there is not much chance of our being seen up to a certain point. But I won't let you run any risk if you would rather not."

"Oh, what is the risk compared to being with *you!*" I cried, gazing up into his handsome face with a rapturous, eloquent look, which he answered by straining me once more to his heart.

We reached the creek, and unmoored the boat; Athol put his fishing things aboard, and pulling off his coat, took his place at the rowlocks, while I took the lines. That *vis-à-vis* situation in a skiff is a good one for lovers. Their eyes are upon each other all the while. I feasted mine on my boy's noble face from the moment we started. It gave me such thankfulness to see him quite himself again, so vigorous and well. Ilfracombe had worked a miracle. I wish I could draw him in black and white as he sat before me, but I cannot. I only know he was a bonny sight, and I loved to look upon him. He had thrown his hat off, and rowed bare-headed; his fair hair clustering upon his broad white forehead, his cheeks flushed and clear blue eyes sparkling with the exercise, his lips slightly opened, showing white, perfect teeth under the dearest little moustache in the world. How different from that foreign friend

of my grandfather's, whom I had been obliged to look upon so much of late!

"By the way, Mattie," he exclaimed, suddenly pausing and resting on his oars, after we had swung along for some distance, "I forgot to tell you, we've had so much else to talk about—but I have something for you, something rather out of the common."

"What, dear?" I asked, taking advantage of the stoppage to pull some water-lilies within reach (and in so doing nearly upsetting the boat), which lilies I stuck in my big straw hat and about my dress. "What have you got for me?"

"Oh, only a *petite gage d'amour*—not very much, but I brought it all the way from India on purpose for you. Wait till you see it, and you shall directly. I'll jump out at the further bend there, and run home and get it. Then you can go on and wait for me somewhere near the old bridge, if you will."

I agreed, wondering what I was to see, for he wouldn't tell me, and was rather mysterious. I expected a piece of Cashmere work or a Trichinopoly trinket; but whatever it might be, I knew I should prize it as if it had been the great Koh-i-noor itself. I thanked him in anticipation. In a few more minutes he had landed, and I was rowing on leisurely alone. Once I glanced over my shoulder, and caught sight of him, as I thought, walking along through the trees a little distance ahead. I was rather surprised at his taking it so easily. When I looked again, he had disappeared.

I was mistaken. It was not Athol I saw; he was already nearly half-way to the Rectory.

As I neared the bridge, he was waiting for me on this side of it with a small basket in his hand. My curiosity was further aroused, and I quickened my stroke.

"What is it?" I asked, pulling in towards the spot where he stood—"something alive?"

"Very much alive—look!" He lifted the lid of the basket, and showed me a little gray animal, like a ferret, only prettier and much sweeter, for it smelt of nothing but hay.

"What is it, Athol?" I repeated.

"A mongoose. Have you never seen one before? This little atom of a beast is the celebrated snake-killer of India. Some people call it the ichneumon, but that's not its right name. As a domestic pet it's the tamest and most affectionate little thing you could have. I'll show you." He turned it out upon the grass. It lifted its taper head inquiringly, and looked round with sharp, bright little eyes, then shook itself, and set tinkling a tiny silver bell attached to its neck by a piece of crimson ribbon, and, after a moment or two, scampered off among the trees like a startled squirrel.

"Oh, you'll lose it!" I cried.

"Not a bit of it. See here!" and he called "Moonie, Moonie, Moonie!" when it reappeared almost directly, and came running back to us at the same rapid pace.

Athol picked up the little creature and put it into my arms, when I stroked it, and praised it, and thanked him delightedly again and again; but all the while I felt that I did not know what I should do with the beautiful little beast, that I dared not accept it, in fact—and I said so.

"But you need not tell the General I gave it to you," suggested Athol; "pay me sixpence, and say you bought it from a wandering fellow. That'll be true enough."

"Oh, but he would be sure to guess," I protested. "You see, the fact of its being an Indian animal, and then—that bell round its neck——"

"Easily remedied," and Athol, with his knife, promptly cut the ribbon.

"But I don't quite know where to keep the poor little thing," I urged, still demurring; "my grandfather won't have any pets in the house, and the stable is the only safe place——"

"Oh, but this is quite a house pet—aren't you, little Moonie? And in the winter she requires a great deal of warmth, being a tropical bird. You'll find her immense amusement, and the cleanest little thing imaginable. But you *must* get the General to let you keep her indoors——"

"I am afraid he won't, though I'll try," I said doubtfully.

"Then perhaps you would rather not have her, Mat?"

I thought there was a shade of disappointment in his tone, and answered quickly:

"Oh, indeed I will, whatever the General says. I won't part with her on any account now."

Even while I spoke I felt that it would be far wiser not to accept this mongoose from Athol. A *pressentiment* prompted me strongly not to do so; but I did not like to appear ungracious, and then it was such a pretty little creature. No, I would not refuse her, though Moonie proved ever such a white elephant; she was mine now, and I meant to keep her. Accordingly I put her gently back into the basket, and embarked her in the boat.

It was now time for Athol and me to bid each other farewell. Under existing circumstances we made no plans for another meeting yet. The situation was so strained that we considered it advisable to await the upshot of this chance encounter, and trust to time and accident in the future.

Ah! fortunately or unfortunately for both, we could not peep over the shoulder of Fate and see what her

stern hand had mapped out for us in that immediate future, and so parted with lighter hearts than when we met, filled with the hope which "springs eternal in the human breast"—hope, alas, too often to prove illusive, a phantasm, the Fata Morgana of predestined love!

* * * * * * *

"Harriet! what *are* you doing here?"

I might well ask the question. On reaching the house I had placed Moonie in her little basket in a safe corner of the hall until I could arrange what to do with her, and had gone upstairs to my room, when I found the old housekeeper on her knees opposite my chest of drawers, the lower compartment of which was open. How was this? I always kept it locked. But I saw plainly that something extraordinary had been going on. The room was all in a litter, the floor strewn with torn bits of paper. I stooped to look, picked up two or three pieces, and instantly realised what fresh outrage had been perpetrated. All Athol's letters had been abstracted and destroyed, and the remnants were left lying on the floor to aggravate the crime, and to incense me to the height of madness.

"Whose doing is this, Harriet?" I inquired, with preternatural calm.

"You mustn't ask me, Miss Mattie, I'm trying to put things straight for you."

She rose from her knees looking rather sheepish and regretful.

"I need not ask," I muttered with clenched teeth.

I went from place to place in the bedroom and found that all my wardrobe and nicknacks had been disturbed, every lock opened, every hole and corner ransacked. I stood for a few seconds in the middle of the confusion,

staring with flashing eyes at the torn letters which lay scattered around me, then without another word dashed out of the room and left Harriet to rearrange my desecrated belongings.

As I got to the foot of the staircase I met Lola; neither spoke, but I observed a strange look in her face as I hurried past her.

In another few moments I was bearding in his den the ruthless tyrant who had heaped this wanton insult and cruelty on my head. I burst into the study without knocking, and closed the door after me with a bang. I advanced a couple of steps, then suddenly staggered and nearly fell against the open bureau, which I clutched with my trembling hands to save myself. My grandfather stood at bay on the old spot—the centre of the hearth-rug. He expected me, and awaited my onslaught with a rigid calm. He stood like a column of marble confronting me; and yet there were signs of fierce inward disturbance; his lurid eagle eyes glared into mine with a deadly look, his nostrils were distended and quivering, his mouth tightly set.

I could not utter a syllable—not a sound would pass my lips—I could scarcely breathe—I could scarcely see him in my blinding rage.

At last he spoke, as I could not.

"I know what you want," he said, in a powerfully suppressed tone, "but I have nothing to say—no apology, no excuse. Between us, nothing more! You have been upstairs, you have found out what I have done; I have waited for you here and—I have found out what *you* have done. *This* is my informant!"

He made a dive at the big chair beside him, and held up to my astonished gaze Athol's present—the little basket I had just brought in.

He stooped, placed it between his knees, and with his one hand, opened the top. It was all done with savage, lightning movements—the work of three seconds—whilst I still stood speechless before him.

Thus liberated, the mongoose peeped out its pretty little head, when he seized it roughly by the neck, and with one horrid jerk swung it round in the air before my eyes.

"And *that's* what I do with it!" he cried viciously, and flung the poor, innocent little animal, quivering in its death-throe, at my feet.

I remember no more—flashes of fire darted across my brain, and then—darkness!

THE STORY

COMPLETED BY ATHOL KELSO

CHAPTER XIX.

IN THE HOUSE OF THE DEAD

"*GENERAL CRUTWELL has been murdered in the night, and his grand-daughter has disappeared from her home!*"

These were the first words that greeted me, Athol Kelso, on the morning after my last meeting with Mattie Freith. This was the astounding news that galvanised the neighbourhood at an early hour, and spread fast and far, like a prairie fire before a driving blast.

Those awful words were uttered to me by my father before I was well awake. I leapt from my bed, stunned and horrified. Had any one else made the announcement, I would have hooted it as absurd; but from him I knew it must be true. My first impulse was to rush up to Gaunchester-Haugh and learn more. My father guessed as much, and peremptorily forbade me.

"Wait," he cried; "we shall know everything soon enough. An inquest will be held at once. Oh, God,

grant there may be a loophole of salvation for that poor, unhappy girl!"

I answered nothing. I was too shocked to talk.

I dressed in a frantic hurry, as if my life depended upon it. I felt as if I had been suddenly ordered on some duty of vital urgency. I was impelled to this nervous haste by the turbulence of my feelings; in reality, there was no more for me to do than for the gaping yokels around—to ask questions and to get a hundred silly answers. But ere long I found I *had* something to do. I received a notice to attend the inquest, which was to be held at Gaunchester-Haugh at three o'clock that afternoon, as a witness! This intimation only added to my bewilderment. Why was *I* called as a witness? I consulted my father, who was equally puzzled. He knew that I had been with Mattie the previous evening, and had severely rebuked me on my confessing this to him. But how could my evidence be required in the case—as to General Crutwell's death by murder or otherwise? All at once a thought crossed me—a harrowing suspicion, of which, however, I said nothing to my father.

Now I must own I feel myself rather at a disadvantage in being left to finish this terribly true story, in that what I have to tell has of necessity so much more to do with stern sensational facts than with the gentle incidents of romance. In the performance of such a task—that is, in dealing with those facts—terseness, I take it, rather than the flowers of language, will best commend the relation, though elsewhere I may give my pen its freedom.

At half-past two I presented myself at the house of the deceased. I had only once before in my life been within touch of that building—on the evening when I

caught Mattie Freith in my arms as she fell from her ivied window.

She had always spoken of the inside of the old mansion as being dark and dismal; and so I found it, where now the shadow of Death made it still darker. The gaunt, gloomy-looking old housekeeper, whom I knew by sight, admitted me. Scroils, the butler, I presumed, was engaged. He was indeed, as I soon learnt —engaged in a deadly wrestle with the foe which had already crossed the threshold, and thrown his master: Death. There was a vault-like stillness and gray obscurity in the entrance-hall; the whole place, with its low ceilings, black oak panelling, narrow winding passages, strange odd corners and ins-and-outs, seemed as if subterranean; a chill struck you as you entered, even in this torrid month of August—it was like going down into a cold cellar.

The old woman showed me into the drawing-room. It was no lighter than the hall; the yellow blinds of the broad Tudor windows, which looked out upon the river, were drawn far down, and to add to the obstruction of light, giant elms without cast their heavy shadows across the house. It was a long, low room, with a handsomely carved cornice and oak wainscoting; a large pillared marble chimney-piece, which seemed too big for its position, occupied the centre of the wall opposite the windows. The sofas and chairs, of the Louis Seize period, were covered with Gobelins tapestry; there were deep recesses filled with books, and antique cabinets with rare china and articles of *vertu*, while some valuable oil paintings of old masters, a Correggio, a Raffaelle, a Guercino, and others adorned the walls. The piano was open, with a piece of music on the rack. I glanced at it; it was a song with "Mattie Freith" written on

the cover. The room, a pretty one, though so gloomy, had an untidy look about it, as if it had not been put straight since yesterday; nor had it, I expect. Through open folding doors draped with curtains was a small ante-room, in which on a table at one side were biscuits and sherry for our refection. Other men came in while I waited; I spoke to those I knew, and after a few minutes went out again into the entrance-hall. The house had held Mattie; it had been her home, such as it was, and I was interested to explore as far as I could without intrusion.

I have said little as yet about my feelings regarding this alleged murder, and her sudden flight; I purposely refrain from doing so while the case is *sub judice*, or at all events, until after the coroner's inquiry has taken place.

Whilst I was standing in the hall, looking at an arrangement of rusty swords, spears, matchlocks, shields, and battered helmets which hung upon the walls—a soldier's relics of old campaigns—a man crossed from one door to another. I turned my head, and recognised him directly, from Mattie's description, from his heavy black moustache, imperial, and short curly hair. It was the late General Crutwell's Hungarian friend, Captain Zollern. What was he doing here, and when had he come? I thought he had gone away long ago. Perhaps, like myself, he had been summoned that morning, and had travelled down post-haste from wherever he was staying.

It was half-past three before the proceedings of the inquest were ready to be commenced. Various delays had arisen as usual; two or three of the jurymen were unpunctual; there had been some trifling disputes about this, that, and the other; a general frittering away of time.

The inquest was held in the dining-room—far more gloomy than the drawing-room—a particularly depressing place for such a purpose, with its dark oak panels, and smothered windows, through which the subdued light shed a melancholy tone on all and everything. Extra leaves had been slipped into the mahogany table for the occasion, at which presided the coroner, seen through an avenue of jurors, all seated in high-backed chairs, and looking rather as if at a Barmecide dinner.

The coroner, Mr. Wilkinson, of Kellingsby, a retired surgeon, was a shrewd, practical man, greatly respected in the neighbourhood, and one who might be relied on to conduct the inquiry with tact and ability, and, last not least, independent common sense.

On his right, at the corner of the table, sat Mr. Vellum, the deceased's solicitor, note-book in hand, to watch the proceedings on behalf of Mattie Freith. Dr. Rench, also of Kellingsby, who had attended the family at Gaunchester-Haugh from time to time, testified as to the cause of death. He knew what he was about; he had Taylor's "Medical Jurisprudence" at his fingers' ends, and was not likely to make a mistake. He gave it as his opinion, that the deceased General Crutwell had died from the effects of a blow on the left temple, which had punctured the temporal artery, and produced concussion of the brain.

By the Coroner.—Do you mean that he died from the concussion, or loss of blood?

Loss of blood; concussion might take days to kill.

Could the bleeding to death have been prevented?

Yes, if I had arrived in time; but he was dead when I got here. I was called to an *accouchement*

last evening—eight miles on the other side of Kellingsby. It was a critical case, and detained me several hours. On my return home, I received the message from this house, and drove straight on without stopping.

Do you keep an assistant?

I do, but he is away at present.

How long had the deceased been dead when you saw him?

I should judge from three to four hours; *rigor mortis* had set in some time. I reached here about 6 a.m.

Was the concussion severe enough of itself to have eventually caused death?

It is difficult to say, but I think not.

Your opinion is that the deceased bled to death from want of medical aid?

Yes.

The jury now withdrew to view the body, also the deceased's study, which had been left as it was, and locked up over-night.

I had taken up a position at one side of the room, where I could command a good view of the faces of the witnesses as they were being examined.

Harriet Scroils, who was called first, stated that she was the housekeeper, and had been in General Crutwell's service over thirty years. She was engaged in one of the bedrooms last evening when Miss La Touche (Miss Freith's governess) came running upstairs, and told her that a dreadful thing had happened in the study. She ran down at once, and on approaching the room heard wild laughter, entered, and found the deceased lying on the ground, as she thought, dead, and Miss Freith in the arm-chair in violent hysterics.

Coroner.—Was any one else in the room?

Yes, the butler and Captain Zollern.

Who?

Captain Zollern, sir, a friend of my master's, staying in the house.

I pricked up my ears. That individual, then, must have arrived yesterday afternoon when Mattie was out.

Harriet went on to say that Scroils and Captain Zollern were trying to restore the unconscious General by applying cold water to the head, and that after a while she and Miss La Touche got Miss Freith out of the study and took her up to her own room.

Coroner.—You carried her?

Yes, she went off into a faint after the fit.

Where was the deceased lying when you saw him?

On the rug, sir, with his head by the fender. There was a cut on the forehead, near the eye, which was bleeding.

Did you notice any things on the floor?

Yes, the Captain pointed 'em out to me.

What?

A bit o' square brass, a basket, and a dead animal, something like a large rat.

These?

Yes, sir.

The articles were produced and placed upon the table: a brass letter-weight, wicker basket, and dead mongoose.

When I saw them I understood all; I knew now what had happened, and why I was here as a witness. A powerful sense of reproach seized upon me, for in-

directly was it not *I* who had brought about this fearful catastrophe?

Harriet continued that she left Mattie to the care of Miss La Touche, returned to the study, and helped to convey her insensible master up to his bed, Scroils meanwhile having sent Buckles, the man from the stables, for the doctor.

Coroner.—State what you know about the relations between the deceased and Miss Freith.

He was her grandfather——

Coroner (smiling).—I mean on what terms did they live together? Good or bad?

Not very good.

In a rambling, roundabout way Harriet then disclosed matters tending to show the chief causes of contention, and told what had recently occurred, how Mattie had been imprisoned by the General's orders for three days, with her window screwed up and door locked.

Coroner.—Why was this? Because her lover had returned from the seaside?

Not exactly, sir; there was another reason.

What?

(After hesitation.) I can't explain for certain, sir. Others know better than me.

Don't try to evade the question. Why was it—if you know?

Well, sir, I believe the General suspected Miss Freith of having robbed him. (Sensation.)

Of money?

Yes, of a very large sum, and that she'd got it hidden away somewhere in her bedroom. So he kept her shut

in there, I fancy, hoping she'd confess and give it up quietly, and so save a piece of work.

Did he accuse her of this?

Not that I know of; I don't think he did; he left it to her conscience, as I may say, and of course she couldn't understand it, never having done no such a thing, which I'm quite sure of—'tisn't likely.

When was she released?

I was told to undo the door about one o'clock yesterday. In the afternoon, when she was out, my master went into her room, forced open everything that was locked, and made a search.

Well, what did he find?

Nothin' only some love-letters, which he tore up and threw on the ground. I was putting the room a bit to rights when Miss Mattie came back about six o'clock, and a pretty rage she was in to see what had been done. She bounced downstairs again, and a few minutes after that this dreadful affair happened.

Harriet represented further that she and her husband, Scroils, after having done what they could for the deceased, had left him in charge of Captain Zollern, who said he knew something of medical matters, and would look after him till the doctor came.

Coroner.—Had the bleeding abated or stopped meanwhile?

It hadn't stopped, but it seemed less. About midnight, when me and Scroils was having a bite of supper together down in the kitchen, we heard the master's bell ringing, and in a minute or two the Captain came running downstairs and told us it was all over—that the General was dead. We was much shocked, and went back with

him to the room, and there saw the deceased lying covered over with a sheet. The Captain said he thought the corpse shouldn't be touched until the doctor had seen it. Me and Scroils then left the room again, and a little while afterwards went to bed.

Towards morning, she said, she awoke. She fancied she had heard strange noises in her sleep, as of some one shrieking out. On missing her husband from her side, she got out of bed to go and look for him, and found him lying insensible in the passage, near the door of the deceased's room. Since then he (Scroils) had never recovered his senses, and was now dangerously ill, and in a sort of delirium. She could only attribute his seizure to grief at the fate of his master. He was not subject to any attacks. As soon as it was light she went to Miss Mattie's room, and found it empty, and the bed untouched, evidently not slept in; then looked for her in Miss La Touche's room, which was also empty, and the bed undisturbed. Both ladies had disappeared, and, as she soon ascertained, had left the house.

Coroner.—Had you any idea where they had gone?
No, sir.
Nor when they went?
No more than it must have been at dead o' night.
Did they take any things with them?
A few, so far as I can see, sir, but not much.

The next witness, Nathan Slugg, the gardener, deposed to having also seen the deceased lying stunned on the floor of the study, with his head against the fender and bleeding, and that he helped to carry him upstairs. He said his master and Miss Mattie did not seem to

be on very lovin' terms, and that he had often heard 'em fallin' out.

Captain Heinrich Zollern was then sworn.

As he stood up at the end of the long table, I looked carefully at him. Hitherto, he had been sitting on the opposite side of the room ; I had already turned my eyes upon him several times during the proceedings. He was very pale, and seemed a good deal cut up at General Crutwell's sudden death. If Mattie had not told me what she did yesterday about this man, I might have been rather prepossessed at first by his manner and handsome face. He looked what he was, a foreigner, but not what he aspired to be, a gentleman, though he was exceedingly well dressed. There was a pronounced theatrical air about him. While I watched his face, I noticed a very peculiar expression in his steel-gray eyes, which were at once restless and furtive, sly and cruel, and afforded an index to his character. As Othello instinctively glanced down at Iago's feet, so one might feel prompted to look at this man's, and expect to see the cloven hoof.

He stated that he was a retired officer from the Austrian army, had made the acquaintance of the deceased in the early part of the summer, and that a mutual regard had sprung up between them. He was very much attached to the General,and felt his death deeply.

Coroner.—You have been staying here off and on most of the summer months, have you not?

I have ; but I have been away lately. I only returned yesterday morning at about eleven o'clock, having slept at Kellingsby over-night on my way back from town. The deceased at once entered into conversation with me about his grand-daughter, when I found him in a greater state of irritation against her than ever.

What was the reason of this irritation?

Her persistent disobedience and defiance of his wishes in regard to a love affair which he disapproved of.

You know all particulars concerning that, I presume?

I do. General Crutwell confided the matter to me some time ago.

Captain Zollern here corroborated what Harriet had said on the subject. He added that he had strongly advised Miss Freith to consider her interests, and not risk her future prospects by flying in the face of her grandfather.

Coroner.—You mean you warned her that the General might strike her out of his will if she persevered in her conduct?

Yes; he had already hinted as much to me, but never to her. I thought it only fair to the young lady to put her on her guard.

That was a kind act. Did the deceased tell you when you came back that he had locked Miss Freith up in her room for three days?

I knew that he had. It was at my suggestion that he released her an hour after I returned.

We have already heard why she was so imprisoned; did you know the reason?

Yes; the deceased told me he had missed a very large sum of money from an iron cupboard in his study.

Did he say how much?

Over nine thousand pounds in bank-notes, contained in a leathern case.

At this point the jury, who were beginning to get a little absent-minded over what promised to be a rather wire-drawn interrogation, woke up again.

Coroner.—Nine thousand pounds! That's a heavy sum to keep in the house instead of being invested or put in the bank.

It is; but, as I dare say you know, the late General Crutwell was a very eccentric man.

And, as it seems, of a miserly disposition. When did he inform you of this loss?

A few days ago.

By letter?

Verbally.

But I understood you to say you had been away lately, and only returned yesterday?

True; but I came down one evening unexpectedly three or four nights ago.

Unexpectedly! You seem to have been quite a tame cat in this house, Captain Zollern.

My poor friend, General Crutwell, always begged me to consider it Liberty Hall; and, as I say, I came down without warning three or four nights ago—just in time for dinner.

Three nights or four nights ago—which?

Four; as a matter of fact, the night on which the robbery was committed.

The robbery! Then you assume there was a robbery?

I say that with reserve. I mean the night on which the deceased missed the money. He came to my bedroom the first thing in the morning and told me of it. I went down with him to his study, and he showed me the safe unlocked and the spot, where the case of notes had lain, vacant. He then remarked that Miss Freith had been up and, on her own confession, wandering about half the night; that he felt certain she must have abstracted his keys from his bedroom whilst he slept, and so opened the cupboard and taken out the notes.

And what did you think when he told you this?

That such suspicion was absurd; I said so. But he persisted in it stoutly; declared she had ample motive, besides being actuated by feelings of spite and revenge; that she suspected, no doubt, she had forfeited her place in his will, as her conduct deserved, and had done this to provide for contingencies in a contemplated elopement with her lover. He thought that quite probable. I laughed at him for the idea, but could not dissuade him from it, neither could I at the time offer any rebutting suggestion as to what had become of the bank-notes. He declared that the disgraceful *exposé* alone prevented him from prosecuting her; that she knew this, and felt it to be her safeguard. I advised him to tell Miss Freith at once of his loss, but he preferred to follow his own course, which was to keep her closely confined to her room, where he had little doubt the notes were secreted, until her better reflections induced her to confess and restore them, and thereby save further trouble.

Coroner.—The iron cupboard was unlocked when you saw it; was the key in the lock?

No; he found it—it was one of a bunch—put back under his pillow, where he always placed them at night.

Did he tell you how his grand-daughter knew of this hoard of notes?

He said she had plenty of opportunity for watching him on the sly.

You state that the deceased came to you the first thing in the morning and told you of the supposed theft, and of Miss Freith having been up half the night: how did he know that she had?

She owned to it.

When? Had he seen her already that morning before he saw you?

He had—that is, he caught her himself walking about the house in the small hours.

Oh, then he was up also?

So it appears; he said he had been disturbed by a nightmare, or something of the sort—that he had seen some startling vision—that a phantom of the dead had appeared to him—I really forget exactly what—I couldn't make out what he meant—he was rather vague—I put it down to over-excitement (the witness delivered all this in rapid, jerky sentences). At any rate, he told me he had found Miss Freith and her governess both out of bed, and that Miss Freith had herself been frightened by some apparition stalking the house, and had consequently awoke Mademoiselle La Touche.

Bless me! there seems to have been a sort of Walpurgis revel going on all night. Did you hear or see anything yourself?

No, indeed (smiling). I slept too soundly; I was very tired after travelling.

Then, as a man says of a good night's rest, you knew nothing about that night's rest?

Exactly, nothing.

And you can form no opinion as to what gave rise to all this ghost-seeing?

I cannot.

Perhaps the ghosts were the children of indigestion.

Perhaps so (again smiling); but the house has the reputation of being haunted, I've heard. They may have seen something——

Do you believe in such things?

No, I don't.

Nor did the deceased, I should say; he was the last man in the world to be alarmed by a spectre. It must have been a very substantial sort of ghost he saw, I think, and probably that ghost walked off with the bank-notes.

I offered the same suggestion—that the house had been entered in the night by somebody, and the robbery committed by that person—but the General would not listen to this, and persevered in his suspicion of Miss Freith, since he had caught her out of bed.

Whose ingenious notion was it to screw up the young lady's bedroom window?

Her grandfather's, I presume; he gave his own orders about it. I told him I thought such a measure ridiculous.

And you did not see Miss Freith at all on this occasion?

No; I went away again the following morning.

So suddenly! What for?

The deceased had an idea of putting his grand-daughter into some home, where she could be properly looked after by a responsible person——

A home for incurables? (Laughter.)

No, sir (severely); a home where some kind lady would take care of her. He asked me if I knew of such a lady whom I could recommend. It so happened I did, and he begged me to go and see her on the matter at once. For that purpose I returned to town.

Then you did not attempt to dissuade him from this step?

On the contrary, I did; but it was useless. I went more to humour him than anything else, for I never anticipated that matters would come to such a pass.

Captain Zollern then explained that on his returning again to Gaunchester-Haugh, the deceased expressed his intention of searching his grand-daughter's room, and requested him to watch her movements after she went out. This he did, and witnessed our meeting. He guessed who I was, for he had never seen me before. He also witnessed my giving her the mongoose, and immediately on regaining the house, reported this circumstance, as he felt

himself bound to do, to the deceased, who, finding the basket in the hall, took possession of it.

Coroner.—Did you hear any altercation or high words after Miss Freith went into the study?

I heard General Crutwell speaking in a loud, angry tone.

Where were you?

In the next room;—then I heard a scuffling sound, then a scream and a crash, and I rushed in to see what had happened. I saw the deceased lying on the floor senseless, with blood flowing from his forehead, Miss Freith in the arm-chair in a frantic state of hysteria, and these articles (pointing to the basket, etc.) on the ground. Mademoiselle La Touche followed me into the room, and we gathered at once what had taken place.

What was your conclusion?

That General Crutwell had destroyed Mr. Kelso's gift of the mongoose, and that Miss Freith, in a transport of rage, had hurled the letter-weight at her grandfather, and struck him on the temple.

By Mr. Vellum.—The deceased, we have been told, was lying with his head close to the fire-place; might he not have slipped up or fallen in a fit, don't you think, and hit his forehead against the sharp fender?

He might have done so, certainly, but from the letter-weight being on the floor with a mark of blood upon it, I concluded otherwise. There was no such mark on the fender. I endeavoured to staunch the bleeding, and had the deceased carried up to bed, while the governess and housekeeper took care of Miss Freith, who was still in violent hysterics, and subsequently fainted away.

Coroner.—When you saw the wound on the deceased's temple, did you apprehend danger?

Not from the wound; I did not know then that the

artery was touched, but the deceased being an old man, and the shock severe, I thought it advisable to send off at once for the doctor. Meanwhile I tended him to the best of my ability, but he gradually passed away under my hands.

And never recovered consciousness ?

Never. As the bleeding refused to stop in spite of all I could do, I became alarmed. I called for help and rang the bell, but it was too late, even if others could have done anything—he was dead. After having told the servants, I announced the sad fact to Mademoiselle La Touche, who was still with Miss Freith, but begged that it might be kept from the latter for the present. I quite dreaded the moment when the unhappy young lady should learn the awful truth. I myself was much upset, and did not go to bed at all. At six o'clock Dr. Rench arrived, and I conducted him to the chamber of the dead, and afterwards drove back with him to Kellingsby to see the deceased's solicitor. On returning here, in the doctor's carriage, at about half-past eight, I was astonished to learn that both Miss Freith and Mademoiselle La Touche had disappeared from the house.

When ? in the middle of the night ?

I suppose so. I sent a man off to Harlingford at once to make inquiries of the station-master, who said that two ladies closely veiled, and answering to their description, had left by the 7 a.m. express for Liverpool.

Did you take any other step ?

Not directly. I was not sure whether I was justified in doing so.

You had strong reason to suppose that General Crutwell had met with his death from an act of violence committed by his grand-daughter, and yet you did not communicate with the police !

I say I did not do so at the time, for though I suspected, I could not be certain it was not an accident; but later on I did give information to the police.

When the doctor arrived in the morning did you mention to him the alarming illness of the butler, Scroils—of his having been found in an unconscious state near the door of his dead master's room

I was not aware of it until the housekeeper herself told Dr. Rench.

You say you didn't go to bed at all?

I did not.

Did you hear any unusual noises in the house during the night?

None.

No calls for help as of some one in terror or distress?

No, nothing of the sort.

I ask because the housekeeper says she fancies she did hear such noises, and it seems to me the man may have sustained some sudden fright.

Not that I know of: *I* certainly heard nothing.

This concluded the examination-in-chief.

As a matter of form I was then called to prove that I had given Mattie Freith the mongoose, but explained that my meeting with her was purely accidental, and not by design. On being asked to state what I knew as to the bonds of harmony or otherwise existing between her and her grandfather, I was compelled to endorse what had already been said.

I being the last witness obtainable at present, the proceedings of the day were brought to a close.

The coroner observed that he considered the evidence of the butler, Scroils, to be highly important to the case, and desired that his deposition might be taken in writing

as soon as possible, that is, when he should recover consciousness.

The Foreman (after a brief consultation with his brother jurors).—Of course, sir, a warrant must be issued at once for the apprehension of Miss Martha Freith?

Coroner.—Certainly. The evidence we have heard, and her having absconded, render such a step necessary.

Mr. Vellum.—Excuse me, sir, but can Miss Freith be arrested as a criminal before a verdict has been found on the inquisition?

Coroner.—Oh, yes; she can be arrested on suspicion, that is to say, and brought before a magistrate.

Mr. Vellum.—That is quite another thing.

Coroner.—The jury will not anticipate their verdict, but of course it is necessary Miss Freith should be apprehended. I have no option in the matter, and she will be taken before a police magistrate in the usual way.

Mr. Vellum.—Then that will not be your act, but the act of the police authorities.

Coroner.—I have the power, but it is seldom used. It is for the magistrates to act as they deem proper. The jury do not absolutely say that they are prepared to give their verdict against her, nor will her arrest on suspicion in any way affect that verdict. I shall now adjourn the inquiry until this day week. The will will then have been opened, and may throw some light on matters. Meanwhile, I hope further important evidence will be forthcoming.

The coroner then made out a warrant for the apprehension of Martha Freith on a charge of manslaughter, and shortly afterwards the house of death was cleared of both inquirers and inquisitives.

CHAPTER XX.

MISADVENTURE OR MANSLAUGHTER?

I WALKED slowly back to the Rectory with a heart like a ton of lead. Mattie was in danger! She knew it and had fled. The evidence to incriminate her appeared only too clear, and her peril arose all through my insensate act in giving her that fatal present. Thoughtless fool that I was! My own priceless love, my own darling persecuted Mattie in absolute danger of her life's liberty—ay, her life itself, for such a trial would surely kill her—and all through me! Oh, what had I done? It was *I* who had killed General Crutwell, not Mattie Freith—it was I who had signed her warrant and doomed the love of my life to a life's imprisonment. There was no other way of looking at it.

My father met me just beyond the bridge. He had not been present at the inquest, and asked me what had taken place. I could scarcely tell him or speak to him at all, I was in such a state of agitation.

"Athol, my lad," he said kindly, "I can feel for ye—I am vary sorry for ye, and sorrier still for this poor ill-fated child, though as I've told ye often enough, the love between ye is all wrong, a hopeless business altogether."

"Ah, hopeless indeed now, father," I murmured, in a broken voice.

"It was always so, Athol. There is a curse, I tell ye, on that unhappy girl's life. It is hard to visit the sins upon the children, but I canna forget her maternity, nor—other things. I would never have let ye marry her—that

couldna be with *my* consent; but there, we needn't talk o' that now."

"You are right, sir; this is no moment to speak of it. Oh, father," I cried in distress, "what has been done is my doing! This is all my fault—all!"

"What d'ye mean?"

"To-morrow, when you read the evidence, you will know."

"Tell me now, Athol. You saw her yesterday, I am aware; but what about it?"

Then I did tell him, and called forth his very natural anger and indignation at what he termed my "criminal folly."

The inquest was fully reported in the *Kellingsby Guardian* of next morning, and after breakfast my father and I went over the evidence together carefully.

The only amelioration in Mattie's awful position of to-day from yesterday was that, instead of being suspected of murder, as had been so broadly rumoured, her supposed crime was reduced to that of manslaughter.

I need not waste time at this pressing point of the story by entering into what my father and I thought of this or that part of the evidence. Enough that we felt sure there was a great deal behind the scenes which had not yet been got at, and that much would probably transpire at the resumed inquiry, which I awaited with acute anxiety.

Though the case looked so black against Mattie, and the charge of manslaughter so nearly proven, my father cheered me by saying that he thought there was room for doubt; that in his own mind he should be inclined to give her the benefit of that doubt, and believed that a merciful jury would do the same, unless some irrefragable point in further evidence put the actual deed of violence

beyond question. The lawyer's suggestion that the General might have fallen and struck his head against the sharp fender, was a sensible and timely one. I fervently hoped such suggestion would carry weight in the opinion of the jury, in spite of other circumstances. But Mattie's having run away in a panic was a foolish act that, above all, might tell against her fatally.

My sentiments in regard to the plausible Captain Zollern were as yet undefined. I was puzzled to know what to think about him at present. His flowing testimony appeared smooth and straightforward enough on the surface; yet one felt there was an ugly under-current running beneath it, which would come up further on and raise a sea of troubles, just as the mighty mass of water which flows over the rocky lips of Niagara dives deep down and rushes under an oily surface for a mile, ere it shoots to the top and convulses the level flush into a raging, death-dealing torrent.

As the coroner very shrewdly remarked, perhaps the reading of the will might throw some light upon affairs. It did; in my eyes a glaring and divulgent light; but then, of course, I looked at the matter through the concave spectacles of prejudice.

The inquest was on the Friday; the funeral took place on the following Wednesday. It was a very plain one, in accordance with the express wish of the deceased, as Mr. Vellum, the solicitor, had heard and understood that wish.

The escutcheoned hearse, with its heavy nodding plumes, drawn by two massive Flemish horses, with their long wavy manes groomed reverse ways, was the one imposing part about it. There was only a single mourning carriage, and only three mourners—Captain Zollern, Dr. Rench, and Mr. Vellum. No cloaked and scarved mutes

were there to mock the eye, and strive with heroism to impart to their familiar every-day features a difference of expression to conceal their identities; no drunkards, wife-beaters, and blackguards, in their respectable suits of woe; no radical bricklayer, democratic blacksmith, or revolutionary cobbler, as venal hypocrites, to pay the last tribute to the deceased, a member of their hated aristocracy.

General George Gaunn Crutwell, C.B., V.C., was buried quietly and unostentatiously with his ancestors in the family vault, beneath the chancel windows, at Chepslow. I myself joined the small procession at the church gates, and fell in with Dr. Rench, behind Captain Zollern and the lawyer. We were met half-way across the churchyard by my surpliced father, who performed the service, and prayed with all his soul for that of "his dear brother, here departed," who had hated him so cordially during life.

In the afternoon of that day Mr. Vellum produced and read the will. He had found it in the iron cupboard which had held the bank-notes. No one was present, I believe, at the reading except Captain Zollern and the housekeeper; but the purport of the will was quickly known, long before it found its way to Somerset House and became open to the inspection of the public at a shilling a head. There was no secret about it; it was painfully simple; it was a will revoking all former wills, and had only been executed three weeks ago.

With the exception of trumpery legacies to his old servants, and two hundred pounds to his solicitor, the deceased left everything of which he was possessed at the time of his death—his Gaunchester estates and all personalty (the missing nine thousand pounds in bank-notes being specially mentioned)—to his much-esteemed

friend and sole executor, Heinrich Zollern; and one hundred a year for her life to Martha Freith, to be paid out of the said estate.

Everything to a foreign stranger, and a hundred a year to his only grandchild! Such was the will of this hard, unjust old churl. It told its own tale. However much the poor dear child might have offended him during his life, that will was an abominably cruel, unnatural act—but, *de mortuis*——! The most charitable view to take of it was to suppose that it could not have been the act of a responsible mind, but of one in complete subjugation to a dominant and unscrupulous influence.

The folks around were more surprised than I. They also called it cruel and unnatural, but supposed that the grand-daughter had brought this retribution on her own head by her self-willed and rebellious disposition, inherited from her mother. However, with this fearful charge, they said, overhanging her, it signified little to the unfortunate girl whether she had been left a hundred pence or a hundred thousand pounds.

True, indeed. The injustice of the will sank out of sight before the impending peril which threatened my poor darling. Oh, God! was I to lose her for ever, and through my own mad act? But she must be saved! If the magisterial inquiry endorsed the coroner's, and she was committed for trial on the capital charge, no expense must be spared; some forensic celebrity in London must be retained for her defence—the cleverest man procurable. If it cost me double the value of my commission the money should be found somehow; my soldier's prospects were naught in the balance with her sweet young life. Oh, I could not believe that it had come to this. What a transitory glimpse of Elysium had

been ours, and now such utter darkness! Our sad love-tale added one more tear-stained page to the records of blighted souls. Once at least during our lives Paradise opens for us out of this dull earth, when delicious hours, fraught with the golden light of romance, bathe us in a flood of thrilling radiance, a radiance like none other that we have ever known. Was mine over? Was I doomed to the desolation that so often follows that intoxicating spell as the penalty of clay-worship? Was my paradise closed to me for ever? Ah, well, and even if it were my love would still survive; banishment beyond the gates would never kill it; it is only love betrayed by love that dies beneath that withering penalty.

But Mattie was still free—she was not yet discovered. What would she do with that freedom? I almost shrank from asking myself, but took hope in the thought that she was not alone, that her friend whom she had doubted had turned to her again in her extremity and proved a woman.

CHAPTER XXI.

A RARA AVIS

On the following Friday appointed for the adjourned inquiry, the additional evidence not yet being forthcoming, the coroner ordered a further adjournment. The butler, Scroils, still lay in the clutch of a raging brain-fever, and there seemed a remote prospect at present of obtaining his deposition.

Days passed, and the next thing we heard was that Gaunchester-Haugh was for sale. The successor gave it out that after the painful tragedy enacted within its walls he could not bring himself to live there, and, furthermore, that his heart was in his own country. He also caused a report to be circulated that it was his intention to furnish funds for Mattie's defence should she be found within a certain time and sent to trial, and subject to the result of that trial should make adequate provision for her out of the proceeds of the sale over and above the sum appointed in her grandfather's will.

All this seemed very well; such intentions sounded fair-spoken enough if they were reliable. People said the man could do no more; I thought he could do no less, nor did I credit him with even that.

Little time in respect to decency was allowed to elapse after the funeral before the sale, the first day of which was advertised for September 27th. By the catalogues issued it was evident Captain Zollern intended to sell up every stick on the place.

Under the head of "Live Stock," represented by a couple of cows, a coach-horse, pigs, and poultry, came

dear Mattie's pony "Rollo" and retriever "Sam." I resolved at once to buy these in, whatever happened, and anything else of hers that I knew of, and could rescue from the hands of strangers. The sale extended over four days; I attended each religiously in order to carry out my intention. My means were limited, but I did not anticipate much competition in the purchases I wished to make.

That this man Zollern should sell even Mattie's pets did not the least surprise me, it was all in keeping. For the matter of that, though, people might ask, what else could he have done with them under the circumstances? I thought he might at least have reserved such things, and have committed them to the care of some one until she was in a position to claim them. If he had had a spark of decent feeling about him, he would have done this. He did not put up her wardrobe to auction, it is true, nor that of Miss La Touche, which had been left behind; I almost wondered that he didn't; but I suppose he hardly considered they were his to sell. It was different with live property, which had to be fed.

On the first day there was nothing for me to buy, nevertheless I remained on the spot most of the time. Captain Zollern was there, and we frequently caught ourselves looking at each other. He seemed to wish to avoid me, and I had little inclination to speak to him; I knew I could not trust myself to do so; I should probably insult him if I did.

The furniture, china, and pictures, the sale of which occupied the first two days, realised unexpectedly high prices. Several brokers from London and other places were present, little black-looking Jews most of them, who bid against each other in spirited fashion. They were

connoisseurs in art, men of taste, and some rare prizes of antiquity and worth were to be sifted out of the Gaunchester-Haugh collection. The owner of such newly-acquired treasures was agreeably astonished at the keen competition, for until these *cognoscenti* came down to buy he had little idea of the hard-cash value contained within the ivy-smothered walls of old Gaunchester-Haugh. My father, also a lover of the antique and curious, made a point of being present throughout this part of the auction, though he could afford to buy but little as the prices ran.

This was the first time he had entered the doors of the gloomy old mansion since that evening, nearly twenty years ago, when he took Mattie's dead mother over in his carriage and broke the sad intelligence of her fate to her father.

The estate itself failed to reach anything like the reserve put upon it by the valuer, and, consequently, was held over; only two or three outlying farms, not within the ring-fence, being disposed of at the time.

Mattie's pets were put up in separate lots on the fourth day, the live stock, etc., being sold in the stable-yard.

The pony Rollo, which she had before I went to India, was knocked down to me for fifteen pounds. Zollern knew I was the purchaser; he was standing close by, watching me. I also bought the retriever, which went for three sovereigns. Presently, to my astonishment, even the old jackdaw, Mattie's disreputable friend (whose daring larcenies I had heard her speak of), was put up. He was not even down on the list. They had not thought him worth including. Mr. Bidwell, however, the auctioneer, a quick little man and inclined to be facetious, observed that "Jack was a very remarkable bird, whose name ought certainly not to have been omitted, a very clever and very cunning old fellow indeed—quite a match for any lawyer, with his beautiful

black suit and crafty character—a gentleman who ought to make his way in the world, and command his own price anywhere. Now, what should he say for this *rara avis*? Should he begin with one shilling? (A laugh.) Thank you, sir! Eighteenpence bid for Master Jack!"

I was disgusted at such paltry meanness in putting up a wretched jackdaw to auction, so blurted out: "Five shillings!" thinking to clinch the matter at once.

There was a murmur and another laugh.

"Five shillings bid for this remarkable bird. Well done, Jack! I said you'd fetch your price."

Jack put his blue-sable head on one side, winked his steel-gray eyes at the people, and gave a sepulchral "caw," as if he quite understood.

"Five shillings! Any advance on five shillings?" asked Mr. Bidwell anxiously, not the least expecting there would be.

"Six!" roared some one.

"Eight!" cried I.

"Ten!" called Mr. Bidwell briskly, "ten shillings bid!"

I glanced round for Captain Zollern, just to give him one look of contempt for this niggardly act in selling the bird, but he had disappeared.

"Ten shillings! ten shillings! Going at ten——"

"Twelve!" I shouted, just in time to save the hammer.

"Fifteen!"

The bid came from some one on the further side of the yard; I saw who—a purple-faced man, with red whiskers, who looked half-drunk. There was another laugh at this.

"Fifteen shillings for this beautiful bird!" cried Mr. Bidwell, flourishing his hammer with a grin of triumph. "I'm not the least astonished—you'll go up to any price now, Jack."

Again the jackdaw gave forth a guttural sound at the identical moment. It was too ridiculous; it seemed quite human, and raised a roar of laughter, in which I joined.

"Fifteen shillings bid for this wonderful bird, gentlemen!" shouted Mr. Bidwell, intensely enjoying himself. "I assure you it's not the value of his claws—you've no idea of the brains in that little cranium of his."

Here somebody stroked Jack's head, at which he ruffled up his feathers as if in appreciation of the compliment, bringing them down over his beak as a hedgehog does its bristles.

I was not to be outdone, and meant to have the bird if I could, so held up my ten fingers twice—surreptitiously, for just then I caught sight of my father, and didn't want him to see me bidding in this absurd manner.

"Twenty shillings!" exclaimed Mr. Bidwell instantly, "twenty shillings bid for Jack. Well done, old fellow!—this is getting exciting. Twenty shil——"

"Twenty-five!" from the same quarter. I was sure that red-whiskered idiot was "fou," but I couldn't stop him—the more reason I should not let him have Mattie's pet to ill-use, so I retorted promptly:

"Thirty!"

"Two pounds!" cried the man, with equal promptness.

And so we went on recklessly, to the vast amusement of the assemblage. From shillings we had got to bidding in crowns, and soon reached four pounds, a ridiculous price for any jackdaw, however clever. But whereas I was inspired by the spirit of British bull-dogism, my opponent, I fancied, was under the influence of another kind of British spirit. I was quite wrong.

"You seem determined to have that bird, Mr. Kelso," said a smooth voice at my side. I turned; it was Captain Zollern speaking.

"I mean to have him if I can," I answered curtly, "but that fellow over there doesn't know what he's doing."

"Oh yes, I think he does."

"Four pounds for Jack!" shouted Mr. Bidwell for the third time.

"Guineas!—four guineas——"

"Four pounds ten," I roared determinedly, yet feeling that I must give in soon in all common sense, and in justice to my purse.

"Athol, are ye mad?" I suddenly heard my father cry. He had detected that last bid, and now elbowed his way towards me. I pretended not to see him. "What are ye at? Are ye mad, drunk, or a fool?" he asked, in an excited tone.

"That man over there is," I exclaimed.

"No, he's not, Mr. Kelso," remarked Zollern quietly, "he knows what he's about, I fancy, but he's as stubborn as you are."

"Four pounds fifteen!" bellowed the purple-nosed bidder.

"Five pounds!" roared I.

"Athol, ye young fool!" remonstrated my father.

"Guineas!" bellowed my opponent.

"Then take it, and be hanged to you!" I growled at last in baffled disgust.

"Five guineas! five guineas bid! (et cetera)—any more, sir?"—I shook my head impatiently. "Going at five guineas!—Well, it's a good price," observed Mr. Bidwell, grinning, "even for such a remarkable bird. Last time at five guineas—going—gone!" and down came the hammer.

Jack was sold, and handed over to his bibulous-looking purchaser. Just then I caught a cunning smile upon Zollern's face, and saw him exchange a glance with this man. My suspicions and temper were aroused simultaneously.

"Confound it all!" I exclaimed, "I believe you've bought the thing in yourself! Why the deuce couldn't you say so instead of making a fool of one!"

"I don't say so, Mr. Kelso," he returned placidly. "But if I may ask, pray what might *you* want with that jackdaw so particularly? You have Miss Freith's pony and dog, I believe? Aren't they enough?"

"I decline to discuss the matter with you, sir," I replied, in a haughty tone. "I don't expect you to understand *my* motive——"

"Nevertheless, I do understand it, I think," he muttered. "Well, sir, Miss Freith owes *you* that extra five guineas for her bird," he added satirically, "for I may tell you that these proceeds will be devoted entirely to her benefit."

"Psha!" The contemptuous utterance sufficiently expressed what I thought of this vaunted generosity. "She owes *you* the loss of her inheritance," I retorted hotly; "will that ever be devoted to her benefit?"

"Come away, Athol," murmured my father, seizing my arm, for I expect I looked dangerous; my glittering eye and flushed cheek warned him that in another moment I might assault the fellow.

"I can quite enter into your feelings just at this time, Mr. Kelso," continued Zollern, in the same bantering tone; "you are naturally disappointed—for the poor young lady's sake, and doubtless feel as much real regret at her loss of fortune as for the more serious trouble which has overtaken her——"

"What do you mean, sir?"

"For both of which she has to thank *you*, remember; but I fear that Miss Freith will have something else to think about now than unprofitable love affairs with——"

"Take that, you infernal scoundrel!" I cried, and over

my father's shoulder, for he had got between us, I aimed a furious blow full at the face of the insulting blackguard; but the old man's powerful hand arrested my arm, and held it fast.

"For mercy's sake, Athol, come away," he implored; "don't make an exhibition of yourself here——"

"It's too late, Mr. Kelso, he *has* done so," observed Zollern quietly; then to me, "you are an officer, sir; you know the next step——"

"I do!" I exclaimed, in a white heat, and still struggling with my father to get at the man; "my next step is to give you a public thrashing for your insult, and, by heaven, I *will!*—let me go, father!"

We were now the centre of attraction; the sale had stopped, the auctioneer was deserted, and, with the true English love of a row, the crowd pressed eagerly around us.

"Fair play, Mr. Kelso—don't hold him!—Bravo, Scotchee!—Give it to the black foreigner!" were the staccatoed exclamations I heard above the murmurs of the people.

It was a discreditable scene; even in the height of my excitement I felt this; those expressions brought me to my senses. I had allowed myself to be dragged into a low brawl, and my dear love's name to be tossed between us. I felt suddenly ashamed for her sake and for my father's, and no longer resisted as he drew me away. But whilst pushing through the people I called back to Zollern:

"Not here, sir—this is no place for gentlemen to quarrel. We shall meet again."

"We shall, Mr. Kelso," he replied, with a deadly smile, "trust me for that!"

The crowd were disappointed; they were expecting, perhaps, to see a "jolly good mill," and my abrupt

retirement from the field called forth some rather uncomplimentary growls—but these, I guessed, only emanated from strangers; the local folk present knew me better than to think that I was showing the white feather, and understood my withdrawal.

As soon as we got clear of the yard my father rated me fiercely for my "hot-headed folly and truculent language," and vowed that if I dared to "go out" with this foreign upstart, no matter how much he challenged me, he would report the matter directly to the Commander-in-Chief, when I should probably find myself cashiered the service. I replied doggedly that I couldn't help the consequences—that the man had forced this quarrel on me, and I meant to have it out with him at all costs.

Finally, however, my father extracted a reluctant promise that if I heard no more from the fellow, I would on my side let the matter drop. And I never did hear any more, and set the offensive brute down as a poltroon. So far I did him an injustice. In due course I learnt the reason of this silence. As a matter of fact, it was owing to my father's interposition. He took it upon himself (he acknowledged to me by-and-by), as a man of peace and common sense, to avert any possible duel by writing a conciliatory letter to Captain Zollern on my behalf. I was highly indignant with him at the time for his having done this, but subsequent events considerably qualified that feeling.

As to Zollern having bought in the jackdaw by deputy, which turned out to be the fact, I also discovered the reason for that ere long.

In his eyes the extravagant price of five guineas was but a flea-bite to the possible value of the bird at that moment when my bidding suddenly prompted him to secure it.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE BUTLER'S DYING STATEMENT

"WASN'T it very dangerous to move him?"

"It was a cryin' shame, sir, and so the doctor says; but what could I do? I only wonder it didn't kill him outright; but, thank God, it haven't done that, though it's no thanks to the Captain that he's still alive."

"And you mean to say Captain Zollern insisted on your leaving the house when you begged to stay?"

"He did, sir; he said he was very sorry, but he wanted to shut up the place and clear everything out, and was afraid that us stopping in it what had had to do with this late sad business might go against his getting it sold."

"Unfeeling brute!"

"That's what *I* thinks, sir. One would a'most fancy he'd done it o' purpose just to finish off my poor husband."

"One might, indeed, Mrs. Scroils."

I met the old housekeeper in the village a few days after the sale, when she told me thus indignantly what had happened.

Scroils's condition was most precarious. It was an outrage on humanity that Captain Zollern should have insisted on his removal, and that, too, in face of the doctor's protest. It raised a strong feeling of indignation against him in the neighbourhood when it became known. But what cared he about that? He was not even a temporary resident—merely a bird of passage who had snatched at the nest of another to feather his own, and would soon be off to other climes with his ill-gotten gains.

He had certainly called twice at the cottage where Scroils was now lying, Harriet informed us, and was most solicitous in his inquiries, and anxious to know what he could possibly do for him—quite the irony of charity, considering what he had done already.

Zollern was staying at the "Peacock" Hotel, I found, an anglers' ancient hostelry three miles from Chepslow, and on his way to and from his new possessions and the dismantled mansion I encountered him occasionally, but he did not honour me with any sign of recognition, nor I him.

Although I knew that Harriet had been no friend to my poor dear Mattie throughout her days of trial, I could not help feeling sorry for the old woman in her present position. I promised to call with my father on the following day to see her sick husband, and we did so, taking with us a few delicacies for his benefit.

By this visit we accidentally anticipated the coroner and his jury, and became possessed of certain information which they awaited.

Harriet met us at the door of the cottage with a gaunt apology for a smile upon her hard lips, which meant, I concluded, that Scroils was a little better; he was so far better, at least, that he happened, by a coincidence, to have come back to consciousness that same morning, and we found him with his mind full of the tragedy of his master's death, and anxious to unburden himself of what he had to tell.

"He could not understand at first," his wife said, "where he was or what had happened, and thought it was all a bad dream." By the time of our arrival, however, he had collected himself sufficiently to be able to make his disclosure.

But his effort to do this was only a flash in the pan; he was obviously in a dying state, and in the interests of

the coroner my father bid me take down in writing what he said.

Here and there it was difficult to catch the weak, laboured sentences which fell from his lips, nor was the whole statement elicited without certain questions, with which, however, I need not encumber it. I give it here as nearly as possible in his own words, making allowances for the breaks and interruptions inseparable with a death-bed revelation. He seemed quite overcome at times when speaking of the deceased; I had no idea he entertained so much regard for his stern master.

"I'm very near my end, gentlemen," he murmured, "very near—I know that—and as I hope to be forgiven for all my sins, every word I tell ye now is truth. I ain't likely to exaggerate at such a time, so you can believe me. What I say is, that that old house up yonder" (meaning Gaunchester-Haugh) "is haunted sure enough, and by a terrible spirit. I hadn't no more belief in such things than my poor master until just lately, but what one sees for hisself one can't very well help believin'.

"It's now close on twenty years ago since a desperate man came down one evening to that house to try and get money out of the General. He might try. With all respecks to my master's memory, rest his soul! the man might as well have hoped to squeeze liquor out of iron. That man was his son-in-law, Dr. Waller Freith, Miss Mattie's father, and, as I had reason to know, a rank bad lot. I remember well that evening when he came—there was a terrifical thunderstorm goin' on at the time, and this feller seemed to have turned up sudden-like in the middle of it.

"The General refused him pretty plump what he'd come to ask for; and when the man found it was no go, his face changed all of a moment like from day to night—I shall never forget the awful expression on that face—it

gave me quite a turn; he looked for all the world like the very devil hisself, and just vanished again out of our sight in a flash of lightning, which it seemed only natteral he should do. His first pretence in coming down was to claim his wife—you remember about that marriage, sir" (addressing my father), "and the poor lady makin' away with herself? Of course ye do, seein' as you tried to save her—but *he* didn't know nothin' of her death or how she died; nor he didn't care about *her*—all he wanted was my master's money. I was afraid to think what might happen in consequence of his being sent away empty-handed and revengeful, and I told my master so; but, bless ye, nothin' never frightened *him*, and he called me an old woman for venturing the remark. All the same, I wasn't to be shook o' the notion that there was danger to be looked for from that quarter. Time has proved me right, though it's taken twenty years to do it. I knew his Satannycal-lookin' majesty 'ud call again some day or other; he hinted as much, and he kep' his word, though when he did come it was in a different shape. I say I didn't believe in no such things as ghosts and spirits; no more I didn't till I saw *his*.

"We'd clean forgotten the circumstance of that beggin' visit—leastways *I* had, it was so long ago—when one evenin', about nine o'clock, at the beginning of this summer—the third of June, I remember it was, the same day Miss Mattie came back from France with her governess—a strange gentleman rode over full tilt from Kellingsby to warn my master that he was in great danger."

Here the old butler gave further particulars of that first visit of Captain Zollern to Gaunchester-Haugh, which I had already heard from Mattie. But perhaps I may be pardoned the repetition if I quote his few remarks on the subject.

"This gentleman," he said, "hintimated that my poor master was in actual peril of his life at that very moment from a raving madman. In point of fact, that his son-in-law, this Dr. Waller Freith, who was crazed with drink—sufferin' from what they call D. T.—had sworn to come down to our house and have the old man's money, or else his life, same as one of them highwaymen chaps might have said. When I heard it I was afraid for the master's life, for I knew the feller wouldn't get his money. It was enough to startle any one, I reckon, to be told such a thing; and the General, ye see, was gettin' an old man now, and it did startle him. He was precious queer and unnerved about it, and begged the strange gentleman to stand by him and see him through the business.

"Well, to cut this part of my story short, the man Freith didn't never turn up after all, and a few weeks later my master heard from Captain Zollern, who had gone back to London, that he was dead—had died o' that same D. T. —consekently the General was now safe from his threats. By-and-by the Captain came down on another visit, and stayed a long time. A nice, civil-spoken gentleman he is, too, though a furriner, and I was just as pleased to see him back as the master was. They grew to be great friends in no time. I never saw such a strange thing; I never knew my poor master take to any one in the like way before; it was puffickly extraordinary. I s'pose he felt that the Captain had done him a real good turn, and by coming that evening had prevented a scene, mayhap a murder. I should have mentioned that Captain Zollern was a pal o' this mad feller Freith; leastways, he had been, but at the last was only just a-lookin' after him, I fancy, to keep him out of mischief.

"Now the friendliness between my master and the Captain appeared to make Miss Mattie a bit jealous, and I

don't think there was much love lost between them two—leastways, not on her side. Things seemed to go queer with her; she wasn't happy. She was in love, ye see, and that love was all contrairy to the General's notions; they was always a-fightin' about it. After she came back from school abroad they seemed to get on a bit smoother for a while; but directly young Mr. Kelso (savin' your presence, sir) returned from Injer, it was as bad again as ever. I believe Captain Zollern tried to make things better for her, but 'stead o' that they got worse.

"Sometimes her grandfather 'ud lock her out o' doors all night, and another time he'd lock her in all day. It was a rum goin' on, altogether. The last time he kep' her in three days and three nights because he thought she'd robbed him. Sich an idea! But he was a bit off his head when he did that, for he'd had a scare during the night which I'll tell ye about. I was woke up with a start in the early mornin' hours, by hearing a terrifical yell echoin' through the house, and then a bell a-ringin' like mad which took me downstairs double quick. There I see the master standin' in the middle o' the hall shakin' like a leaf, and white as a chalk-pit. He asked me all out o' breath if I'd seen any one as I come along. I told him no, and then he swore solemnly he'd just met that there man hisself, Waller Freith, stalkin' about the house like a goblin. Nor I couldn't persuade him he hadn't; and judgin' from what *I* myself saw afterwards I reckon now he *had*—that is, his ghost. He cried out excitedly that the man was hidin' somewhere about—lyin' in wait to murder him—and wanted to send me off for the police there and then. I tried to quiet him, for I thought he'd just been a-walkin' in his sleep, as I knew he'd done afore, and had had a bad nightmare; but it wouldn't do,

Presently we come across Miss Mattie and the governess on the landing. They wanted to know what was up, but the General just told 'em to go back to bed, when Miss Mattie said as she'd heard us talkin' and that *she'd* seen somethin' queer too that night; but Miss La Touche she pooh-poohed it, and the master, not to frighten 'em, I s'pose, kep' to hisself what he'd told me, and sent 'em off to their rooms again.

"Meantime, I advised him to go and wake up the Captain, who was stayin' in the house, and ask what *he* thought about it. I don't know what passed between 'em, but the next thing I heard was that the master had been robbed of nine thousand pounds. That fair took my breath away. He was just like a wild man at first, but after another talk with the Captain he quieted down again quite sudden. Then to my astonidgement I was told that Miss Mattie was to be locked up in her room quietly on the suspicion that *she'd* committed that robbery. It was ridicklus, but I daren't say nothin', so obeyed orders, and me and Nathan Slugg screwed up her window. But now to get on to the last part o' what I've got to tell.

"The evenin' o' that day when Miss Mattie was let out I was layin' the cloth in the dining-room, and soon after she came indoors from her walk I heard a sort of a shindy takin' place in the General's study——"

Here Scroils endorsed precisely what was given in evidence at the inquest, except that he said he did not notice any letter-weight on the ground when he went into the room; but this he might easily have overlooked in the flurry of the moment.

I take up his statement again at the point where he retired to bed after the General had succumbed to his injury.

"I needn't try to describe, gentlemen," he said, "what my feelin's were at this awful sudden trouble that had come upon us—my poor master killed, and in such a way. Yet I was sorry, too, for Miss Mattie, for whatever she *had* done I knew was all in a blind fury, and there must ha' been a reg'lar fierce tussle between 'em. I was fair dazed when I got to bed, and couldn't even say a prayer for the poor master; I couldn't take it in yet that he was really dead and gone.

"It was a long while afore I got to sleep, and when I did I only slep' by fits and starts. I was a-lyin', I may say, betwixt wakin' and dozin', when all at once a strange horrid noise in the night made me jump nearly out on to the floor—just such another sort of yell like a death-knell as I heard a few nights afore when I found the General out o' bed and scared at something he'd seen. Harriet didn't hear it; she was fast asleep. Poor soul! she was tired and worrited, and had cried herself off: she ain't a woman given to pipin' her eye neither. Well, I lay still and listened for another sound, with my heart rappin' against my chest like a flail in a barn.

"It was a blustery night, the wind had got up since evening, and was a-howlin' round the old house like a pack o' shriekin' demons, makin' the winders and doors rattle and crack like blazes. I was inclined to believe after a minute or two that what I'd just heard was nothin' but that same wind a-screechin' in my dreams, but suddenly another rending yell, a frightful unnatteral cry like the first, startled me—it set my flesh all of a creep, and put me into a cold sweat; then came another, fainter; then I heard the words 'Murder! help! help! murder!' dyin' away on the breeze. I was sure o' them words, they sounded awful, and went through me like a knife.

"I got up out o' bed tremblin' so I could hardly put foot to the ground. I didn't disturb my wife, but struck a light, and slipped out of the room alone. When I got to the bottom of our stairs, I stopped and listened again; but I couldn't hear nothin' more; it was all quiet now except for the wind. I don't know why I should ha' done it—from some sort of instinct, I s'pose—but I went straight away to my poor master's room, where he was now a-lyin' stiff and cold. Just as I got into the passage leading there, I thought I heard a strange gurgling noise coming from that room. The first thought that struck me was that he wasn't dead after all, and had been calling out to us for help. But I was feelin' so queer, I couldn't go in directly and see; I was forced to drop into a chair in the passage and wait a bit to recover myself.

"I must have gone off dizzy-like for several minutes, for when I come to, my fag-end o' candle had flickered out. But it was daybreak by this time, and through a skylight overhead the dawn was just comin' into the house, and showin' up the dark corners. I felt cramped, and had the pins-and-needles bad in my feet. I got up at last, and turned towards the door o' my master's room, when I saw such a thing as no words o' mine can properly tell ye. It gives me shivers to think about it, much less talk. What I did see was a black crouchin' figure (a man's, or what ye like to suppose) creepin' out silently and gradual through that door. He seemed to be coming out backwards. He stopped outside, facing towards the room, and stooped over the door-handle, which he covered with a cloth or handkerchief as he turned it slowly, and closed the door. After he'd done this he stood still, as if listening to something inside the room. He was carryin' a candle, and presently, as he shifted his position a little,

I could see by the light on his clothes that that man was *smothered with blood*. All his shirt-front and collar were crimson, as well as his hands and cuffs.

"For the moment I thought it was the doctor—that he'd come over in the night. But as the figure rose up from stoopin' over the keyhole, it turned and fronted me, and then I saw the face. I knew it direckly—I could never forget it. It was the same devilish face I'd seen twenty years before! The dark blood-stained object standing there was no more nor less than the spirit o' that man Waller Freith, haunting the chamber of the dead!

"It came towards me—I don't know what happened else. I just heard my own shriek as I gave it, and felt myself drop to the ground like a log!"

The old man had barely strength to finish his gruesome statement. It was clearly by a dispensation of Providence that he was permitted to return to consciousness, for that brief interval, to make such statement in the interests of justice. The exertion and excitement of doing so left him quite prostrate, and he only survived long enough to sign it as his deposition on oath in the presence of the parish constable, whom I hastily summoned to the cottage for that purpose.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A SECRET DESPATCH

WHAT had Scroils seen? What horrible apparition had appeared to him that night?

My father thought it was only the hallucination of a disordered brain; that the old butler's mental faculty had been affected by the awful tragedy of his master's death, hence this extraordinary vision, and the association of ideas in his mind with regard to the man Freith. And certainly this appeared to be the only acceptable explanation of the mystery. Yet I was not content to look at it so. There was that in the old man's manner of revealing what he had seen, so solemn and impressive, that the narration carried conviction along with it. Furthermore, I could not forget what dear Mattie had told me, nor her extreme earnestness in the telling, and the way in which she deprecated my too manifest scepticism.

Loth though I was to give credence for a moment to such an idea, I almost began to believe that Gaunchester-Haugh must be haunted by some evil spirit; then, setting aside the supernatural for the natural, conjectured that some fantastic living creature may have lain hidden away in the lofts by day, to come out at night with the rats and owls to forage for food, and terrify all who crossed him in his nocturnal prowlings. I had heard of such creatures—of starving vagrants living for weeks and months in this way without detection. For the rest, the recognition of the face of a person long since dead, or other startling

facts, might easily be supplied by an already overwrought imagination.

Ghastly legends of ghouls and vampires crowded into my brain as I thought upon the butler's weird story. This skulking object covered with gore, which he saw creeping like a black panther out of the room that held the corpse—what was it? Could it possibly have been some such human creature as I surmised concealed in the building—some hideous wretch who had crawled forth like a reptile in the night to violate the sanctity of the dead? Either that or the supernatural.

I talked my conjectures over with my father; but he adhered to his belief that what had been seen was no more than a phantom of the brain.

At the adjourned investigation before the coroner, which now took place, the deposition of the butler having been read, Dr. Rench was examined, and deposed that the pillows on which the head of the deceased General lay were saturated with gore, and the whole bed much smeared and besprinkled with blood, indicating a protracted death-struggle. There were also splashes and spurts of blood upon the floor, all which, however, might arise perfectly naturally from a person bleeding to death, and there not being adequate attendance. Except for the cut on the temple, there was no mark of violence on the body.

Harriet Scroils said that when she went up with her husband and Captain Zollern to the deceased's room, she noticed that the sheet thrown over the body covered the whole bed, which would prevent her seeing the blood-stains referred to. She did not advance beyond the doorway.

Captain Zollern was then called, and stated that the condition of the bedding, as spoken of by the doctor, was as he (witness) had left it on death supervening, when he had drawn the sheet over the corpse. The deceased

tossed about a good deal at the last, as if in pain. Zollern was quite certain that he had heard no unusual noises in the night. He was awake, and must have heard any shout or cry such as had been deposed to by the butler. He was present himself, over three months ago, at the death-bed of his unhappy friend, Waller Freith, therefore, unless the dead are allowed to revisit us, it was an impossibility that Scroils could have seen and recognised such person, as he alleged, sneaking about the house; the wild delusion arose, doubtless, from the highly-agitated state of the old servant at the time.

A severe comment was here made on the removal of Scroils from the house after the auction, which Zollern lamely vindicated by some specious argument, taken for what it was worth.

Amongst various questions on minor points, which met with prompt and unequivocal replies, he was asked further about the will, and said that he had no idea General Crutwell had made him his heir until that will was read. As to whether Miss Freith knew or not that she had been disinherited he could not presume to say, but thought that her grandfather's surmise as to her suspecting this was not without grounds.

The rather minute and protracted cross-examination of Captain Zollern brought the inquiry to a close.

On summing up the coroner was evidently disposed to accept the dying deposition of the old butler incredulously, as my father did, but thought there was a good deal of mystery attached to the case, which the further evidence adduced had not tended to clear up. After some deliberation the jury returned an open verdict — that General Crutwell had died from the effects of a blow on the temple, but how he came by that blow there was not sufficient evidence to show.

This verdict, however, did not affect the warrant out for Mattie's apprehension; I knew that, and that she would yet have to undergo a magisterial inquiry as soon as she could be found.

As I have already said, I was not long in arriving at the true cause of that sensational bidding against me for the jackdaw. At all events, from what I myself observed, I was able at length to form a shrewd guess at Captain Zollern's motive for having kept back the bird. We had a turret-room at the Rectory, which I made my smoking-den, since my invalid mother could not bear the smell of tobacco downstairs, the window of which room overlooked part of the grounds of Gaunchester-Haugh, where breaks in the trees admitted of a view.

Of late I had often noticed Zollern from a distance pottering about outside the house, and on bringing my binoculars to bear upon him, I saw that he was always with that blessed jackdaw, and apparently following it from place to place in the garden.

At last a ray of light broke in upon my stupid darkness. I marvelled that the thought, which had evidently occurred to him long ago, had never struck me before. Jack was a notorious thief! This leathern case of bank-notes for nine thousand pounds had been lost in an unaccountable manner, and no trace of it had been discovered. Supposing the General had gone to his iron cupboard one day, left it open for a minute and turned his back—quite likely—might not the felonious bird, with predal curiosity, have hopped in through the study window at the opportune moment (it was generally left unclosed in the summer days), and made off with that *multum in parvo*—the little case containing so much wealth? Why not? "If not, why not?" as Captain Cuttle would say—nothing more probable.

The question then remained, where had he hidden it? And that is exactly what Captain Zollern was trying to find out. No wonder he bought the bird in for five guineas, with the prospect of nine thousand at stake!

My sudden enlightenment in this matter was confirmed by what old Nathan, the gardener, told our man Moles, over a quart of ale at the "Gaunchester Arms." Until now our servants and those "up at the 'all," as they called it, had been systematic "cuts;" but they thought, I presume, that the death of the General ended the ancient feud between the two houses, *ergo*, Nathan had been hob-nobbing with Moles, and had duly discussed "the Cap'en" and his proceedings.

"It was a most uncomprehendable matter to him," he said, "what a hextrordingnary fancy that there furrin bloke had taken to Miss Mattie's old daw." (Nathan was no sharper than I had hitherto proved.) "Blest if he wouldn't spend 'ole days a-goin' about with that there bloomin' old crow, and 'peared jest as if he come up to the 'ouse since the hauction for no other darned puppose than to amuse hisself playin' foller my leader with the critter. It was puffickly redicklus!"

Now, if Jack *had* stolen the case and hidden it, from the bottom of my heart I hoped he would never reveal its whereabouts to this money-grabbing treasure-hunter, and felt strongly tempted to destroy the bird on the sly, in order to foil him. In fact, I considered Jack ought to be hanged for the theft, like his namesake of old. But, whilst actually contemplating this cold-blooded assassination with the best intentions, my thoughts were suddenly snatched away by a far more important circumstance.

One morning I found awaiting me on our breakfast-table a red-sealed letter addressed in a peculiar hand-writing, and with the postmarks Flynmouth and Barnstaple

upon it. My father had not yet come downstairs; I was alone. The moment I saw that letter a burning whisper at my heart told me whom it was from. The breaking of the seal confirmed that whisper. I read:

"If it is possible pray come to me. I have run all risk to write to you, but will say nothing more till we meet, and that will soon be, I know, after you get this. I believe we are quite safe here. Ask at Flynmouth for Combe-Ratton, and when you get there you will soon find us. We are at a cottage (Mrs. Carew's) five miles from the village on the borders of Exmoor."

There was no name signed, and the letter, like the address, was in a disguised writing, in case it should fall into other hands than mine.

Again and again I read the dear lines until I had them by heart; but I read them with very mixed feelings—of joy to get any news of my Mattie at last, doubt as to her real safety even in that wild retreat, and perplexity as to how I could possibly obey her summons with discretion and secrecy. But I would go, of course; on that resolve I never hung a moment; had it been to the furthermost corner of the earth I should have flown to my poor fate-stricken lover. But I must go without the knowledge of my father; I could not possibly take him into my confidence, if I did I well knew he would strenuously oppose such a step; nay, more, as a conscientious minister, might feel it incumbent on him to give information to the authorities at once. By telling him, therefore, I should wreck Mattie's frail bark of safety. I had no alternative but to act on my own responsibility, and to invent, when I left home, a white lie as to where I was going and what for.

I felt somewhat easier in mind after the receipt of

this letter, for knowing Mattie's impulsive nature, I confess that until now I had entertained grave apprehensions as to what she might do under the terrible ordeal.

And so, poor darling, she had taken refuge, like one of the native deer from its pursuers, among the moors and woodlands of beautiful North Devon. But I had faint hope that her harbour would remain long undiscovered by the bloodhounds of the Crown.

Fraught though the present situation was with pain and peril, there was a glow of romance about it (heightened by the very hiding-place thus selected in that lovely locality) which tinged the black clouds overhanging our loves and lives. I wondered what had put it into her head to flee thither. Having so lately left that glorious iron-bound coast, the grandeur of its scenery dwelt with me vividly, for during the latter part of my stay at Ilfracombe I had been able to get about and enjoy the champagne air and art-inspiring surroundings ; I could, therefore, the more readily fancy to myself Mattie's picturesque sanctuary on the bracing moors.

From the collective pronoun used in her letter, I inferred that she was not alone, and that Lola La Touche was still with her.

This sudden decampment of the two girls at dead of night from the scene of the tragedy had always puzzled me. I could never quite understand it. It was unlike Mattie's spirited, independent nature to run away and hide in this manner. I should have been less surprised to see her stand her ground and face the consequences. I argued that she must have been urged to this fugitive course by her friend, and I was partly right, as I soon discovered ; but there was more beneath the surface than I suspected, which had brought about that precipitate flight to the secluded domicile of Mrs. Carew.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE SANCTUARY

WITHIN three days of hearing from Mattie, I was on my way to her. Caution and strategy were essential to my plans, and though it was distasteful to me to hoodwink my father as to my purpose and destination, the exigency of affairs demanded it.

After what seemed to me an interminable journey by rail and coach, and a hired conveyance from Flynmouth, I reached Combe-Ratton, the village indicated in her letter, at about three o'clock on a perfect afternoon in mid-October. I might have taken a shorter route, I found, but followed Mattie's scanty directions. Having been told at the village the way I should go, I left it by a bridle-path and walked across the moorlands to seek out Mrs. Carew's cottage. I was glad I elected to do the five miles on foot instead of riding, for it was a lovely walk; I might well have wished to prolong it, in enjoyment of the wild, delicious scenery around, but that I was so anxious to reach the shrine of my pilgrimage.

My path would be no easy one to follow were it not for the coast-line to guide me, and a certain distant beacon for my pole-star, of which, however, I can only catch sight now and again as I rise to some fern-crowned eminence. It is a very up-and-down road I have before me, but its beauty more than compensates for the climb. One minute I am breasting a steep tor, to descend the next into a lovely valley cushioned with deep oak-woods, then along the level moor for a distance, till the road suddenly drops again behind some softly rounded knoll.

Range upon range of golden autumn woodland and expanses of purple heather stretch in front of me, while far away to my right rolls the distant moorland, unbroken by tree, or tor, or anything, save at rare intervals an ancient, old-world furze-bank.

At the next rise over a high, beetle-browed bluff, which overhangs a fairy glen, I command a magnificent panorama of the coast—the blue sea flecked with white sails—grim, swarthy cliffs and jutting crags ranging far out into the deep ocean in fantastic shapes of jagged ironstone.

I take out my field-glasses (which I had the thought to carry with me), and sweep the majestic line, when I can discern the face of the dark, stupendous precipices alive with white sea-birds, and the distant coves lying in underneath, paved with black shark's-tooth rock, interspersed with strips of shelly sand—parallel edges of strata upheaved by some prehistoric earthquake, whose serrated ridges would quickly grind to matchwood the stoutest ship if driven here ashore. The tide is out, and along the rugged beach, left high and dry, are large sharp rocks, all pointing eagerly oceanwards as though pricking up their ears to know when their friend the sea is coming back to them, and what prey he brings to their savage jaws.

Three hundred feet below me, through the wooded valley, runs a brawling trout-stream, clear and sparkling as the fountain of Bandusia, where the red cattle, standing fetlock-deep, are lowing to each other and whisking away the tormenting flies. At the further end, through yonder narrow gorge, the stream rushes impetuously to its final leap over a steep cliff, thence from its base to flow quietly on to meet the eternal thunder of the Atlantic rollers.

I drop down from my observatory, and plunge once more into the rich warm woods, fragrant with dying autumn flowers and the almost imperceptible odour of

fallen leaves; on through a resinous-scented forest of fir and larch; past a treacherous bog, where I flush a wisp of snipe from their snug haunt among the moss-cup and wolf's-tooth; and out again upon level moorland.

Two miles further brings me to a yet grander and more wildly beautiful valley. I start and pause at a sound I know well. A rutting stag makes the quiet woods re-echo with his rattling thunder, and far up the rocky glen another sends back his trumpet answer to the challenge, which is taken up by a third in a faintly echoed note of defiance from a distant heathery crest, which lies quivering above in a yellow haze. The leaf is yet thick, and gives cosy covert to beasts and birds; I catch no glimpse of these stormy warriors.

Another mile beyond, and I am within sight of my Rosamond's bower—a secret and far-retired retreat enough to give a sense of security from the outer world. The description I have received of the *locale* identifies the cottage at once.

It stands on the declivity of a sparsely wooded hill, far from any other dwelling, with a flower-garden in front, the prettiness of which is rather detracted from by the clumsy stone wall which encloses it. Hardy ferns have forced their way in places between the chinks of the boulders, and break the gray monotone of the wall's face. White-rose bushes creep round the cottage and are trained into an archway over the door, mingling with honeysuckle and clematis.

On nearing the spot I saw a venerable-looking dame digging up potatoes in rear of the garden, who, directly she caught sight of me, threw down her three-pronged fork and ran into the house. Doubtless this was Mrs. Carew, who had probably taken me for a myrmidon of the law, and had gone indoors to warn her lodgers of my approach.

Presently a young face peeped cautiously through the

low latticed window, appearing in a blaze of golden light where the declining autumn sun fell upon the diamond panes. I recognised it through the dazzling glare, though it only gave me three seconds to do so, and in another three the door opened, and a girl's graceful figure came running out to meet me. It was Mattie.

Instinctively I half opened my arms to receive her, but we were under the eye of the cottage; she slackened her pace before she came up, and held out her hand demurely. But her words were something warmer than the action.

"Athol, my own true boy!" she cried, "thank God you have come, and so soon!"

"I would have come sooner if I could," I replied; "I was only afraid you would reproach me for the delay. I had some little difficulty to get away."

"I knew you would have, dear. I hardly dared write."

My eyes anxiously searched that sweet, loved face, and I detected there, with pain at my heart, the traces of all she had passed through. But we did not speak of that now, nor of the fearful origin of her trouble. She only said:

"Oh, Athol dearest, *what* have you thought of me?" and I pressed her hand reassuringly. She understood, and looked up at me through starting tears in loving, grateful silence. Then we went into the cottage together, and she presented me to Mrs. Carew, the old dame I had already seen in the potato-patch.

"I don't like her very much," Mattie whispered on our way to the door, "but she means well, I think, and of course we are quite dependent on her. She knows who you are (for I was obliged to explain), and will make you comfortable after your long journey. I'm sure you must be tired."

I was rather, and confessed it. A cup of Mrs. Carew's good refreshing tea presently was very welcome. Besides,

I had the return five miles' walk before me that evening to Combe-Ratton, where I had bespoken a night's lodging, or longer, at the little inn, so was the more glad of a little rest and reflection.

On going into the cottage, I looked round expecting to see Lola La Touche, but she was not visible. I awaited her appearance without asking questions. I knew Mattie would tell me everything by-and-by.

We had entered by the kitchen, "so to call it," as Dame Carew apologetically remarked, "which I must be pleased to excuse, as there was no fire in her little parlour, though she'd have one lighted directly."

It was a quaint, old-fashioned apartment, with low ceiling, traversed by heavy, black oak beams, from which hung sides of bacon, bundles of chips and dried herbs, and a single-barrelled fowling-piece in leathern loops. On one side of the wide chimney-recess was a high-backed settle, brightly polished, but looking rather stiff and uninviting as a seat. An old smoke-jack hung in the yawning chimney, beneath which crackled a bright wood and peat fire in a low grate, a primeval ancestor of the Abbotsford pattern. Every article in the room bespoke the clean, careful housewife.

I took stock of Mrs. Carew while she was engaged with her teapot. She appeared to be about sixty-five, but though scrupulously neat in her person, was not by any means a prepossessing-looking woman. Her gaunt, brown, sharp-featured face, set in a white-frilled cap, gave her somewhat the look of the historic wolf in "Little Red Riding-Hood," after it had donned the old grandmother's night-dress. I could understand Mattie's remark about not liking her very much. Her countenance was of a crafty, treacherous cast, such as one is accustomed to see among the criminal classes.

I wondered what her history was, and how in the world Mattie or Miss La Touche had got to know of her in this far-away corner of the earth. But doubtless they had just taken refuge here haphazard.

"The young leddies find it a bit dull with me, I'm afeard, sir," remarked the dame, sitting down on the settle after she had waited upon us, and sipping her tea from her saucer. "I'm a lone kind o' body myself, ye see, sir, and ha' been a widder this ten year or more; but though I can't do much to 'muse 'em, I does my best to make 'em comf'able."

"Oh, I'm sure you've been very kind indeed, Mrs. Carew," said Mattie, rising at once to this fished-for compliment. "Your pretty garden and the delightful scenery around us make up for any little dulness we may feel."

Mattie, with tact, put the garden first, I noticed, to please her hostess.

"Ah, well, yes, miss," returned the dame, "it's a pretty enough country, to be sure, and, fegs, I on'y wish ye could enjoy it more. But it don't do to be too bold, do it, my dear? You'm so safe here as ever was rabbit to burrow whiles ye keep in it, but I can't answer if ye gets wanderin' outside."

By this remark, and the way it was put, I saw that Mrs. Carew had been taken into confidence, and she let me understand that at once by her next observation.

"Of coorse, I knows all about it, sir," she went on, "and a sad business it is; but I hopes as the worst 'll blow over by-an'-by, though I shall be mortal sorry then, too, for the young leddies are coompany to me, and I bain't in no hurry to lose 'em."

The reason of their being here, and the whole circumstances, made it awkward for me to converse at all on the subject, and more than once I tried to change it, and so did

Mattie. But the old crone seemed proud of her position as confidential friend and protectress of the refugees, and was inclined to harp upon the fact.

"'Twixt ourselves, sir," she continued, blinking and nodding knowingly at me over the edge of her tilted saucer, "'tain't the first time I've took in a party on the quiet."

Now, what did this mean that she was accustomed to hiding people in trouble? If so, it was very obliging of her, but of course she only did it for the lucre. And again I wondered how on earth Mattie and her companion had found out this leery-looking old dame. It could not surely have been altogether by chance; somebody they had met on their journey, who knew of the woman, must have recommended her to them.

"You've no need to be afeard for 'em whiles they're with me, sir; they're so safe as ever can be," reiterated Mrs. Carew, who had all the conversation to herself; "and when I say they I means *that* young lady, o' course; I knoo; and they'll continue to be safe the long as I hold my tongue, as long enough I shall, so you can make yer minds easy. Their business is *my* business, ye zee, sir, and I'm to be depended on. To be sure, what *can* happen *may* happen, and who shall say it shan't if the law-ferrets get on the wind? But with me, if aught's gwain to come about, I've always a sort of forecasting in my inwards, like; 'tain't there now, and, as I tell ye, you may depend on old Polly Carew."

I was becoming considerably bored at this garrulous old female and her egotistical adherence to the subject, despite our attempts to get away from it; it was a relief, therefore, when Lola La Touche came into the room at last, and caused a diversion.

Mattie made me known to her friend, whom I took an

early opportunity of thanking aside for the noble, unselfish part she had acted in this painful crisis. Whilst I was speaking to her I noticed Mrs. Carew's little black, inquisitive eyes fixed upon us with a rather peculiar look, and later caught her and Miss La Touche exchanging a significant smile, which I don't think they meant me to see. This look and smile further excited my curiosity; I longed for a talk with Mattie alone, to get some explanation of their having come here. The opportunity arrived all in good time.

Suddenly the old woman volunteered the remark that she did not pretend to be a great cook, but if the young ladies wished me to stop and join them in their evening meal, she would do her best to provide a little something extra. Mattie pressed me to stay, and I was glad enough to accept, for I naturally wished to spend the evening with her, and was, besides, as hungry as a hawk, the tempting look of Mrs. Carew's kitchen giving a sharper edge to my appetite. Added to this, if I waited I should have a good moon to light me on my way back to Combe-Ratton; I couldn't possibly follow that wild path at dusk, and Phœbus, in his ruby robes, was already sinking behind the broad Atlantic.

The dame now went into the little parlour to light the fire and arrange preliminaries, and Lola La Touche considerately accompanying her, Mattie and I were left alone; but we knew we could not long have the kitchen to ourselves, so strolled out together into the garden.

It was a beautiful autumn evening; the eager air was laden with the sweet odours of the earth, the western sky full of colour—a genuine Devonshire sunset—tor and woodland were bathed in a rich roseate glow, like the gorgeous transformation scene of a pantomime. A peaceful calm brooded over the scene, and the occasional bellowing

of a roving stag from the heart of the valley struck upon the stillness like an alarum.

"Hadn't you better put on a warm shawl, Mattie?" I said, as we passed out of the cottage; "the air is chilly."

"I will," she answered; "but I must borrow Lola's, for I haven't one with me."

And this reminded me how almost destitute she must be, poor darling! of any wardrobe. Having got the shawl, she rejoined me. After a few irrelevant remarks, I opened the discussion of the recent painful events by telling her what torture and anxiety I had suffered on her account since that fatal evening, and that never had I ceased to reproach myself for being the primary cause of all her woe. But her generous nature would not admit this.

"Things had been working to a climax for long past, Athol," she said, in a sad, weary voice, "and I knew that a decisive rupture would soon take place between me and my grandfather—but oh! who could foresee such an awful end as this? Again I ask, what *have* you thought of me? Am I guilty or not of that poor old man's death? I cannot tell you. I was literally beside myself with passion at his barbarity—but I will not say a word against him *now*—and all I can remember was seeing him slaughter that poor little animal before my eyes. I think I must have rushed blindly at him, and struggled with him for an instant, but I know nothing for certain of what happened. When I came to myself, I found I was in my own room with Lola. She was most kind and sympathetic, and tried her best to soothe me in my violent agitation. At that moment I did not know that my grandfather had been hurt; but after a while she told me how that she and Captain Zollern had run to the study on hearing a scuffle, and had found him lying insensible on the floor, with his forehead badly cut and bleeding profusely, and me in wild hysterics in the

arm-chair. I little imagined then that that cut was to prove his death-blow."

Here Mattie asked me if there had been an inquest, and I told her all about it, of the evidence given, and the open verdict returned. I shrank at present from letting her know that there was a warrant out for her apprehension; yet I felt that I must break this to her sooner or later, and prepare her for what would surely happen. I could not share Dame Carew's optimist view as to the security of this little sanctuary.

Mattie was silent for some time after I had given her particulars of the Coroner's investigation, and seemed to be pondering in bewilderment over the evidence. At length she said, ignoring all other points at present as of secondary importance:

"Surely I should remember, Athol, if I had taken up that letter-weight and thrown it at my grandfather?"

"I should think you would, dear," I replied.

"Of course I should; but I don't, and I don't believe that's how it was. He must have fallen somehow, and struck his head against the fender. But then, that's almost as bad, isn't it? It was through me."

"Yes, *through* you, perhaps; but in that case the blow would not be judged as coming from your hand. It would make all the difference if it can be proved that way."

"When? Do you mean at the trial?"

"Well—yes."

"Then there will be a trial?"

"I—I am afraid so."

"Ah, and of course they will find me out at last, and take me to prison! Oh, Athol!"

Poor darling! She spoke so plaintively and pitifully; I was angry with myself that I had said so much, and tried to unsay it. But I saw she fully realised now her

dreadful position, and I considered I should be wrong to deceive her.

"Oh, I wish I had stayed and faced it all!" she cried passionately; "it would have been far better for me. I was a coward to run away; that makes it look all the worse. But it was not *my* doing. I was literally not a free agent on that frightful morning when Lola told me my poor grandfather was dead. I didn't know what I was doing; I was dazed, stupefied. She kept urging me to fly—fly—fly with her from the place; that she would stay with me, and take care of me, and remain my friend, whatever happened. I did just as she told me; she dressed me as if I had been a child, packed my few things and hers together, and we went out in the dark hours of the morning, and walked all the way to Harlingford Station. We got there in time for the early express north, and Lola took our tickets for Liverpool. We were both thickly veiled, but I thought the station-master kept looking at us rather suspiciously; no doubt that was my fancy, for I imagined the same of everybody else I saw on our journey."

"Had you money?"

"Very little myself, but Lola said she had enough, and could write to her friends for more. She has been most kind, Athol, throughout; I cannot say enough of her kindness; I am only sorry now I ever breathed a word against her; but you must forget that."

"I will. And whose idea was it to turn back into Devonshire?"

"Oh, hers, of course; she did everything and proposed everything. I was simply a nonentity—a dummy. We only stayed in Liverpool a few hours, and then booked to Exeter. I asked her now and then what we were going to do, and where we were going, and all she said was

'Leave it to me.' But afterwards she explained that she had fortunately seen somebody at Liverpool whom she knew very well, having caught sight of him on the platform when I was in the ladies' waiting-room; and that on putting the case to him (without, of course, mentioning names), he had recommended her to a pleasant little haven of refuge he knew of, in Exmoor Forest. I was relieved to hear this, and asked no more questions, being content to trust entirely to her. She tells me I then relapsed for a time into a state of stupor. We slept at Exeter that night, for it was very late when we arrived, and next morning went on to Barnstaple, where we took a sailing-yacht to Flynmouth, and from there drove to Combe-Ratton, as you did. Then we came on here across the moors on two pack ponies, accompanied by a guide; and that part of the journey I should have enjoyed, if I had not been so utterly wretched and terror-stricken. By-the-bye, I think you must have been very clever to find that road by yourself; how did you?"

"Only by remembering what was told me at the village," I answered. "I hope I may find it on my way back to-night as easily. I dare say I shall, for my bump of locality is good. And when you got here, Mattie, wasn't the old woman very much astonished to see you?"

"She was, but after Lola had had a private talk with her, she seemed to quite understand the position, and made a great fuss to welcome us, and provide for our comfort. So here we have been buried alive ever since. You may imagine my state of mind all this time. I was in great perplexity about writing to you; I longed to do so, and yearned for a word from you of advice and comfort. I knew you would be sorry for me, and would not judge what had happened as the world might. But Lola was dead against my writing;

she said it was most dangerous, and that at any rate, I ought to wait and give things time to quiet down a little. That's how it was you didn't hear sooner. And now I think I have explained everything. Oh, darling, I can hardly believe I am talking to *you* all this time. I have often thought I should never see you again; I thought my misery would kill me—indeed I did."

She looked up into my face with such tired, pleading eyes; I took her to my heart and held her there, whispering all the consolation that I could.

Presently she said:

"Do you think me very selfish, dear, for asking you to come all this way to comfort and advise me?"

"My darling, what would my love be worth if I would not do a thousand times more?"

"I know you would; but it won't compromise you in any way, I hope, will it?"

"I don't see that it will; and even if it did I shouldn't care, so long as my coming gives you a little relief."

"Bless you, dear. It is such peace and rest to have you with me."

She kissed me; her lips were quivering. I knew what was in her poor aching heart. We were both silent for a minute or two, filled with our own thoughts. Then she said suddenly:

"Oh, I do wonder what will happen, Athol. What will they do to me—will they hang me?"

"Good gracious, darling, don't talk so wildly. First, they have to prove the act against you—and with the open verdict already given at the inquest, I think there is little fear of their doing that. At the worst, I expect the trial will be no more than a matter of form, and you will be well defended—*I* will take care of that."

"Oh, you dear faithful boy, what a blessing you are

to me! Your every word makes me feel better, and almost hopeful. During these days of agony and suspense I have prayed so for *you* to be with me, for though Lola is *very* good, it isn't the same thing—she cannot be to me what you are at this dreadful time. I have often felt, on calm reflection," she continued, after a moment, "that this hiding away here like a real criminal was worse than useless, and have wished to go back and confront the consequences; but Lola wouldn't let me. Of course I know we can't stay on here indefinitely; it must end soon. They are sure to find me, I should think, if they wish—that is, if they are searching. Are they, Athol, do you know?"

This was a straight question, and I was on the point of telling her that the coroner had issued a warrant against her. But her poor trembling little hands and voice showed how nervous and excited she was at this moment, and I dared not; besides, it was our first evening together for long past; I could not bear to mar it by frightening her, and filling her mind still more with dread anticipation of the inevitable.

I hid my answer in an *équivoque*, and then talked of other matters. She asked me if her grandfather's will had been found, and what it said. I told her. She did not seem the least surprised or even (at first) disappointed, merely observing that she knew all along that that crafty scoundrel Zollern was only playing his cards to get her grandfather's money, but felt sure it would never do him any good. As to the poor old man's mad notion that she had robbed him, surely no clearer proof was needed to show that he was not a responsible person at this time.

All at once the regret came upon her, for my sake, that she had lost her fortune, but my quick answer cut short her sudden lament, and seemed to satisfy her.

I told her also about the sale, and that I had her pony and dog quite safe, but couldn't get the jackdaw, for the all-sufficient reason which I explained. She understood it at once, and agreed with me in what I thought.

From the sale we drifted back to the inquest, when I again spoke of old Scroils' death-bed declaration, and of the extraordinary apparition he had seen on that fatal night.

Mattie did not appear to hear or understand when I mentioned this before, being probably too much occupied with other points, and now she only said quietly:

"Poor old man, I suppose he was quite light-headed when he told you so."

"I don't think he was; I am convinced he knew perfectly well what he was saying, he was most earnest and impressive; and though the coroner and others evidently doubted his statement, I, for my own part, am inclined to believe it."

"Do you mean, then, that you really think my father's spirit appeared to him that night, Athol?"

"Heaven only knows what he saw—*something*, I'm certain. It's altogether a weird, extraordinary mystery, I cannot get it out of my mind; however, there is little chance now of its ever being cleared up, I expect."

Mattie said nothing for a few moments, but I guessed her thoughts rightly when I reminded her of what she herself had seen in the house a few nights before, and which was as unaccountable and unaccounted for as the apparition that had appeared to the butler; and both she and he were equally positive as to what they had seen. How, then, was this strange coincidence to be explained? We could not explain it; it was beyond comprehension, and our discussion of the subject left us still in the strands of puzzled conjecture and bewilderment.

CHAPTER XXV.

WITH RATHER QUEER CHARACTERS

MATTIÉ and I stayed out in the garden together long after the last flush had died out of the sky, when there followed an interval of total darkness until the moon rose above the moor.

Lola La Touche came out to tell us that tea was ready just as we were preparing to go back into the cottage. Mattie, then, with a touch of her old dear quaint way, apologised to me for this unfashionable repast, explaining that such a thing as a late dinner had not yet entered into the philosophy of their hostess. But she need not have apologised. The little table in Mrs. Carew's parlour, with its homely spread, was a picture, especially to a hungry man. It made my mouth water like a schoolboy's; for what better fare could the heart desire than an appetising dish of broiled ham and poached eggs, a castle of buttered toast, cranberry cakes, watercresses, and a bowl of Devonshire cream, all laid out temptingly on the snow-whitest of table-cloths? But there was more than this to complete the bill of fare; the old woman presently brought in a smoking steak, whispering "venison" mysteriously in my ear as she set it down in front of me. Then out she went again, to reappear in a few minutes, to my further astonishment, with a couple of cold grouse. Verily, Mattie and her friend seemed to have fallen on their feet here as regarded catering and *cuisine*.

I am afraid I behaved rather like a vulture, but there was some excuse for my voracious appetite, seeing that it

had met with nothing better to appease it since the morning than a fossilised sandwich and a mysterious sausage-roll at one of the refreshment bars *en route*. At any rate, my appreciation of our hostess's excellent provender appeared to afford her much gratification, and she said "it was a downright treat to zee mun eat as if mun ralished the vittles sat afore him."

I certainly was agreeably surprised, but altogether puzzled to know how they managed for supplies at all, much more such luxuries, in this isolated place. By way of explanation I learnt that the old dame had a "boy," an only son, a strange, uncouth, retiring individual, who seldom showed himself except on business, and who, with the donkey I had noticed tethered on the grass outside the wall, did all the marketing for his widowed mother at Combe-Ratton; and something else than marketing; I found out more about "the boy" presently.

Mrs. Carew was evidently well satisfied with her tenants and the payments made to her, which I judged were pretty liberal. I feared Miss La Touche's resources, whatever they might be, must have had a considerable strain put upon them, and contemplated offering to recruit them from my own before I left.

After our aldermanic tea, dear thoughtful Mattie, knowing I loved my pipe, made me go into the kitchen to smoke it snugly in the chimney-corner, where it was allowed, but not in the parlour. She meant to remain with me while I smoked, but we found Jim Carew, "the boy," seated on the settle enjoying his evening clay, so I was left to his companionship instead.

He was a queer-looking creature, a burly, weather-beaten specimen of a Devonshire rustic, with long arms, enormous shoulders, short, thick neck, and a receding, animal-shaped skull; altogether, rather like a large ape in

fustian. He remained silent, and appeared very shy and uncomfortable after I had taken my seat opposite. I tried to draw him into conversation, but it was not easy. His mother, who was "washing-up" in a far corner, seeing my fruitless efforts, rallied him on his want of manners.

"Now, boy," said she—he must have been between forty and fifty, but was never called anything but "boy," apparently—"now, boy, wake up! Why don't ye talk to the gentleman, 'stead of sitting there like a great loony?" Then, apologetically to me: "Ye must excuse mun, sir, he's on'y a rough chap."

"The boy" shifted about uneasily on the settle, as if he suddenly felt several thorns running into him, and bestowed a friendly double-barrelled wink upon me, as an earnest of more sociability presently. In a few minutes Mrs. Carew left the kitchen, and directly her back was turned he got up, and, breaking now into a volley of winks, walked across to a cupboard with a mystic air, and took from its recesses a large "black jack."

"I knows where to find mun," said he, at last opening his lips. He came back to the chimney corner, half-filled a tumbler from the "jack," and handed it to me. "Now try ye that, ye wain't get better nowheres. Do ye now."

I thanked him, and put my lips to it; it was whisky, and capital whisky, too, as good as any I ever tasted. I halved the liberal allowance with him in another tumbler, and filled up mine with water. "The boy," I need not add, swallowed his "neat."

This was the open sesame; he now became as talkative as he had hitherto been silent.

"Iss, fegs, ye'll call that good, I say. T'old mother her kip mun for herself for a nip on the sly."

"Then, perhaps, she'll be angry at your taking it," I ventured to say.

"Never ye mind, I'll stand that. Her's got more somewheres, but I rackon her've a'most run out by this. That whisky was some of my father's. He's dead long sin', and the whisky's about done. There's no more o' the likes o' *him* about now," added "the boy" mournfully, "and there's no more o' the likes o' *that* aboot neither," more mournfully still. "Maybe ye'll not guess what *he* was—my father?"

I said I had no idea.

"Well, then, shall I tell ye? Suspose as ye be a friend o' t' young leddies ye're a friend o' t' mother's and mine, so there bain't no need o' secrets." This was a precautionary feeler, to which I responded that whatever he liked to say would be considered strictly in confidence.

Thereupon, after further mysterious winks and hints, "the boy" let me a little into his family history.

His father, it appeared, had been a smuggler of the old school, and had laid a nice little nest-egg, from which had been hatched this cottage. He had built it during his latter days to "give his old woman a roof to her head," and had left her something besides to keep it there.

From her son's account Dame Carew must have been a lawless sort of creature in her time, like her husband—had told fortunes, dealt in contraband goods, and performed other indictable acts against the Crown. As for "the boy" himself, I gleaned from his remarks that he was now an inveterate poacher, a profession he seemed to have taken up when smuggling was put down. This accounted, then, for the supply of game at supper, I supposed. It did.

Truly, these were strange characters for Mattie and her companion to have taken shelter with. I wondered how this friend of Lola's had discovered such people. It seemed all part of the mystery enveloping affairs.

Having finished my pipe, I returned to the little par-

lour, where I found the old *Égyptienne* sitting over the cheerful fire, and spinning a long-winded yarn to the two girls about herself and experiences when young. She was in full swing, and made no attempt to stop on my entering the room. At the moment when I did so, she was apparently corroborating in a varnished form what "the boy" had just been imparting to me. But this was nothing new from her; she was perpetually talking about herself and her antecedents, I heard afterwards, and amongst other statements boastfully laid claim to being a direct descendant of the celebrated Doone family, of ancient North Devon fame.

I listened to her with no little interest, exchanging now and then a look of surprise with Mattie.

Lola lay languidly back in her easy-chair all the while, with drooped eyelids and seemingly half-asleep, as if bored by the long story.

At length a sudden recollection of unfinished housework brought the loquacious old crone to a stop, and made her beat a precipitate retreat to her culinary domain.

The lull in the room when she had vanished was like that felt in a railway-carriage on the pulling up of an express after a long run.

"A most extraordinary old creature, your hostess," I observed, laughing. "I don't suppose, if every gabbling word she uttered was enough to hang her twice over, that she could hold her tongue even to save her life."

"I dare say not," said Lola, in a drowsy tone; "and yet she must have been taught to hold it at one time, for others' safety if not her own. But our position here, of course, makes her feel that she need be under no reserve, and," smiling, "she certainly avails herself of the license in the luxurious liberty of her tongue."

"Mattie has been telling me about your journey

together, Miss La Touche," I said, "and how you came to be directed to this place. Really, it was an extraordinary piece of luck to discover at once such snug and secret quarters."

"Yes, it *was* rather lucky, wasn't it?" Lola did not trouble to move from her lazy attitude, and spoke in a listless, drawling voice—a very sweet voice withal. "It was an old Paris friend of mine I came across at Liverpool," she said, "much to our mutual surprise: not a very reputable friend, I'm sorry to say; at least, he has got himself into no end of difficulties lately, somehow or another, but he's a good fellow. I only saw him for a few minutes, while Mattie was in the waiting-room. It seemed he was even then travelling under a cloud, and, strangely enough, was running away, like ourselves, as I may say, from a pursuing trouble. He begged me not to tell a soul that I had seen him, and I promised I wouldn't. All at once it flashed across me that here was an opportunity to be made use of. I knew that Monsieur—there, I was just going to let out his name—that my friend had himself not long since been lying *perdu* somewhere in England for several weeks—hiding from his creditors, I suppose—and I thought he might be able to recommend us to some nice safe little retreat to which we could go at once; so I put my question into judicious shape, and, after some demur, he told me of this, giving me full directions how to find Mrs. Carew, and leave to use his name as an introduction. I was very thankful, I can tell you, for I don't know where on earth we should have gone if it hadn't been for him."

"Yet I thought you seemed confident enough before that," said Mattie.

"Naturally, to give *you* confidence, dear; but in reality I hadn't the remotest notion where I was going to hide

you. I felt so grieved and distressed for her, Mr. Kelso," added Lola, turning to me, "that I acted on my first impulse, which was to get her away from the scene of the dreadful catastrophe before daylight, without thinking what we might have to go through afterwards—not that I minded for myself so long as I could protect her."

"I'm sure you have been a perfect angel, dear Loir," said Mattie, with grateful affection, "in all you have done; still, if you won't think me very ungracious for saying so now, I almost wish we hadn't gone. Athol and I have been talking it over, and I believe it would have been better to have stayed and braved it out."

"Oh, does he think so?" Lola opened her soft, sleepy eyes a little wider, and looked at me as if in surprise.

"Well," I said, "I can quite understand any one acting like that on the spur of the moment, and believing it to be for the best; but when you come to think about it quietly, Miss La Touche, you will allow it was not very judicious, and calculated to raise a strong prejudice against her in the case——"

"Oh, I hope not," returned Lola; "but they haven't found her yet, and I don't believe they ever will."

I said nothing to this; nor did Mattie, who was gazing thoughtfully into the fire as if searching there for an augury of coming events.

"You represented the exact position of affairs to Mrs. Carew directly you came, did you not, Miss La Touche?" I asked, after a pause.

"Yes, I did; I considered it best to do so," she answered.

"I shouldn't have thought it quite necessary——"

"Perhaps not, but at any rate it was quite safe."

I stayed talking over matters with them for another

hour, when Mrs. Carew came back into the room and announced that "the moon was well up now, and that I should have a nice walk back to the Combe." This meant that she wanted to get rid of me, and shut up the house, so I took the hint and rose to go, arranging to come over again on the morrow.

While the old dame was doing a final babble before I left the cottage, Mattie slipped on a warm wrap, and afterwards came out with me into the garden for a few parting words alone.

It was cold; the stars were blinking with frosty brilliancy in the blue vault of heaven. The perfect calm at sunset was broken by a light sighing wind which had risen with night's pale regent, and flying wracks and wisps of cirrus clouds were sweeping across the sky. Now a black mass of vapour hides the moon, and darkens the silvered scene for a few seconds; now as it scurries onward she reappears, playing peep-bo with the earth, and dancing merrily from behind the cloud, when nature's face lights up again with a responsive smile.

So with Mattie's, as I gazed into it fondly, while we lingered hand in hand in a long good-night. She looked so sad and loth to let me go, but when I repeated my promise to come over early next morning her dear face beamed again with joy.

Presently she asked, in a little anxious tone: "Is it quite safe, Athol, your walking back all alone to-night, do you think?"

"Safe? why not, dear? What is there to fear?"

"Nothing, I hope. I only mean you may lose your way. Won't you let 'the boy' go with you? Do."

I assured her there was no necessity to keep "the boy" out of his bed, and that I was not the least likely to miss

my path, having once come by it, especially on such a bright night.

"But a road always looks so different by night," she argued.

"It does. However, I took my bearings as I came along. You needn't be afraid of my getting lost, I think."

She seemed satisfied.

"Then till to-morrow, darling, good-bye," she said. "Mind, I shall count the minutes till I see you. Don't be later than you can help."

"Trust me. Good night, and heaven guard you, my own love. Keep a good heart; have faith, my Mattie, for as that North Star yonder is a pilot to me and thousands of others this night, so is faith in our inmost souls, to guide us safely through the dreariest wilderness of woe."

CHAPTER XXVI.

A SHINY NIGHT

With her last sweet kiss still tingling on my lips, I swing along at a brisk pace down the moonlit valley. I feel in higher spirits than when I passed this way a few hours before, from the mere fact of having seen and been with her I love so dearly.

But the present trouble is no whit lessened. Danger to her looms in the immediate future, like a black dominating rock ahead, dark as the deep shadows under yonder trees just in front of me.

I slacken my pace to climb the next steep tor, on the crest of which are grouped some cattle standing out in silhouette against the sky. On reaching the top, I pause to take breath, and look back at the little cottage. A light is twinkling at an upper window; Mattie's, I guess; that she has placed it there as a last good-night signal for me to see before the hill divides us. I send back an answer to her by the spirits of the night, and turning again after a few minutes, continue on my way.

I walk slowly along the brow of the hill; the transcendent beauty of the moonlight scene, viewed from that commanding point, fascinate me; it would be sacrilege to hurry. The solemn grandeur of the rocky coast, gleaming beneath the soft magic light, appears even more entrancing than when under the glow of the autumn sun. The image of the cold, chaste queen—"the queen of heaven's bright isles"—lies quivering on the bosom

of the ocean, and the rough-hewn black and silver shore stretches darkling and glistening far to the right and left, till merged in murky space. The placid beams shine here and there upon the distant crags and headlands,

> ". . . . Deepening with blacker night
> Their chasms; and there the glittering argentry
> Ripples and glances on the confluent streams.
> A lovelier, purer light than that of day
> Rests on the hills——"

But it is late; I must not loiter to revel in the poetry of Phœbe's smiles; it will be past midnight, as it is, before I can make Combe-Ratton, and the gude folks of the "Seagull" may be sitting up for me. So reluctantly I descend the further side of the tor, and walking at a quick stride, am soon far below my recent coign of vantage, and down in the deep wooded valley, where the shimmering light glances from tree to tree, and touches leaf by leaf like a flitting spirit.

Once or twice I stopped and listened. I thought I heard footsteps behind me, but it was only some stray cattle crossing the valley. Before I had gone another hundred yards I halted and listened again. I was certain now I heard footsteps, not like the tread of oxen, but swift, stealthy steps as of some one following cautiously. I waited; they drew nearer, then ceased. I peered back along the path, but could discern nothing among the dark shadows, and after a minute resumed my walk. I was not nervous, I never supposed there was anything to be nervous about; I merely wondered what belated creature was wending his way, like myself, along that unfrequented road at dead of night.

All at once a rustling and crashing through the underwood on my right made me start, and a moment afterwards a deer bounded across the path a few yards in front.

Crack! pi—ing! I heard a bullet whistle past me, fired by some one close behind, then a voice exclaiming:

"A's down! dead as nits!—no, a bain't! cuss mun, a's oop again!" and I beheld the gorilla-like figure of "the boy" rushing towards me in the full gleam of the moon-rays. I recognised him at once. He ran by me like the wind, intent on his quarry, and didn't seem to see me. With a sportsman's impulse I followed him, but we did not go far. He soon saw it was useless: the stag was on, wounded, there was no tracking him at night; and Jim came back growling out a deep oath or two.

"Bl—t his carcase," he cried, "it's a pity to lose mun, but a's gone, I rackon."

He then explained how, as he was coming after me, he had caught sight, through the trees, of an antler glinting in the moonshine, and had hurried forward on the chance of a running shot.

"And I cracked mun hard, I did," said he; "a dropt to mun's knees. Ye zee, sir, didn't ye? A wain't live to sniff t' mornin' air. But us be better to leave mun the night. Maybe I'll find mun to-morrow."

"I hope you may, Jim," I said; "but how's this? I thought you'd gone to bed."

"Bed!" grunted he contemptuously, "I never goos there sich shiny nights as these—but t' young leddy asked me to come on after ye and mind ye the way. She was kind o' feard ye'd lose it."

"Oh, not I," I replied. "Miss Freith told you to follow me, did she?"

"Iss, fegs, her did." Here "the boy" winked profoundly. "And if ye've a likin', I'll show ye a bit o' sport on the road. I put t' ball in old Bess here" (tapping his smooth-bore affectionately), "just for that same chance, and got it, but not the baste. Now I'm gwaine to fill for the 'fool"—

wild fowl, he meant—and he proceeded to load his piece with a heavy charge of duckshot.

I could not resist joining the old poacher for the nonce, but reminded him that I wanted to get back to the village in some sort of decent time.

"So ye shall," said he; "it bain't a stone's fling from the ro'd where us be gwain. Ye must ha' seen it as ye coom—a bit o' bog and water down the next dip."

I recollected it; it was about a mile further on. He said there were always duck there at night, and the thick cover on the further side made it an easy stalk.

In another quarter of an hour we were close upon it.

"There ye are!" he whispered sepulchrally; "what did I tell ye? D'ye see mun—three, five, seven, eleven, fifteen—good!"

Yes, there they were, a round score of them, looking from where we were like black insects on a lighted mirror, and now and again asserting their individuality by a faint "quack."

"Here, do ye take she," said "the boy," in another hollow whisper, offering me the gun, "and do ye nip round there to the left through they firs and have a blaze into the thick. Her'll do the trick, I'll warrant ye."

I demurred politely, saying that I didn't wish to deprive him of the shot, whereat he appeared rather huffed.

"Oh, well, as ye please," said he; "her'll keck a bit, but her'll not bust, if that's what you'm 'feard on."

I saw my magnanimity was wasted, so took the gun without further hesitation, and crept off towards the point indicated. Jim followed, and though I went quietly enough, I noticed he went still more quietly, even with his heavier boots. A life's practice had given him the tread of the tiger through the jungle.

We got up to the duck without ruffling a feather of suspicion. They were all huddled together now in a lump on the shining water, not twenty-five yards off. It seemed rather like committing an agrarian outrage to take advantage of them by a pot-shot at that distance; I would sooner have put them on the wing; but my credit was at stake as to the number bagged, so I brought the ill-balanced muzzle of old Bess to the present with deliberate care, and "went for the brown."

Bang! A tremendous report, like that of a cannon, which sent me flying backwards—quack, splash, flutter! and no less than five duck lay struggling in the water, while a sixth, I believe, fell wounded further on.

"Brawvo!" shouted "the boy" in approval, and while I was recovering from the shock to my shoulder he was up to his middle in the marsh, collecting the spoil. "Fegs, ye plugged mun well," cried he, wading back in triumph with his load; "ye shall have 'fool to yer supper to-morrow night."

"Why, dash it, who could miss them?" I replied, laughing. "It was like blazing into a farmyard. But, by the immortal Jupiter, Jim, that gun of yours is a caution!" I added, handing it back to him and still rubbing my shoulder.

"Ah, iss," said he, grinning and winking. "I told ye her'd keck a bit, but her's a wunner to kell."

After this little episode I wished "the boy" good night; I said I was much obliged to him, but wouldn't take him any farther, especially as he had the birds to carry, and that I could find my way on well enough.

"Very well, zir, as you please;" and for the first time he touched his cap, more out of respect, perhaps, to my murderous shot than to myself. "You be comin' over to-

morrow, I suspose?" I said I should, before midday. "And, 'twixt ourselves," he added confidentially, "when do ye expect they scouts down?" He meant the detectives.

"Not at all, I hope; but you mustn't be surprised at whatever happens."

"Not I. I bain't never surprised at nought. Right. I'll be on look-out for mun."

I didn't take in at the time what he meant by that last remark.

"Good night, zir."

"Good night, Jim;" and we parted, he to add another possible head or two to the dame's larder before he went to bed, I to get there as soon as I could, and sleep like a boa constrictor.

About another five-and-twenty minutes' walk landed me within the limited precincts of the old gray village, which lay slumbering tranquilly in the moonlight. Not even the bark of a cur disturbed its calm repose as I approached; not a sound save the lullaby murmur of the distant sea floated on the gentle night breeze.

All was dark within the inn; its narrow window-panes glittered under the cold moon-rays, which threw the branches of an old dead oak at the back of the hostelry into ghostly relief against the deep-blue sky.

After knocking deferentially at the door for some ten minutes, I heard a shuffling, slippered tread flopping down the creaky stairs, and mine host of the "Seagull" drew the bolt and opened the door, yawning and blinking, and looking rather sulky, though very comical in his ante-diluvian nightcap. I apologised for my late hours, which apology he accepted with a strange rumbling noise like the warning of an earthquake; and giving me a candle, I went up to bed.

I was off betimes next morning, directly after breakfast, and got back to the cottage by eleven o'clock.

I found Mattie and Lola sitting out in the garden, surrounded by the last roses of summer, and basking in the warm sunshine, for it was a beautiful day after a beautiful night.

I thanked my anxious little lover for her kind persistence in sending "the boy" to show me the way, and told them of my poaching performance, which of course they had already heard from Jim's ultra-communicative mother.

After some desultory conversation, Mattie informed me with a sly smile that she was going to make use of me now I had come. Could I guess how? I made two or three unsuccessful attempts, and then gave it up.

"Well, the fact is," she said, a slight flush rising to her cheeks, "we've scarcely a thing to our names —I mean neither dresses, linen, nor anything else; so we're going to get you to—to provide us with what you can——"

"Good gracious!" I exclaimed, taking her *au pied de la lettre*, "well—yes—certainly—delighted, I'm sure—proud to lend you anything *I* ve got; my portmanteau's at your service."

A hearty laugh from the ladies greeted my generous offer.

"You dear, silly old boy!" cried Mattie, the blush deepening, "I didn't mean *that*——"

"Oh, capital!" said Lola, laughing on in keen enjoyment of my *remarque ingénue;* "you remind me, Mr. Kelso, of that very literal Frenchman who translated Cibber's 'Love's Last Shift' into 'La Dernière Chemise de l'Amour.' Ha, ha, ha! No, we don't exactly mean to rob *your*

wardrobe to replenish ours. All we want is for you to do a little shopping for us, if you will."

"Oh, I see; yes, of course—I beg your pardon—only too glad," I replied, laughing with them; "but where are there any shops?"

"None nearer than Flynmouth, I'm afraid," said Lola, "and wretched affairs there. However, we must take what we can get, *à bon marché*, and leave you to make it."

"I'll do my best, but why should you go in for the cheap and nasty? I'll try somewhere else; and as for money, Mat, I've plenty; leave that to me."

"Ah, *amour fait beaucoup, mais argent fait tout*," murmured Lola, smiling, as I said this to Mattie.

It was decided at last that I should go to Barnstaple next day, and I was given a paper of commissions in an envelope which I was on no account to open, but to deliver straight into the hands of the forewoman of the best millinery establishment to be found in the place.

I went accordingly and carried out all injunctions to the letter, paid over the counter *without* asking for a bill of items, and received in exchange a bulky parcel which I duly delivered at the cottage the following morning. I was rewarded with much prettily expressed gratitude, and told I had acquitted myself in a most creditable and promising manner as the coming (domestic) man!

But I must not dwell too long on the pleasant days we spent together in that romantic valley—pleasant, in despite of the heavy load of past and impending troubles which weighed cruelly upon our minds, but which we strove to thrust out of sight temporarily with the philosophy of "sufficient for the day——"

The time passed very rapidly, far too rapidly for

Mattie and me, and I soon found I had been a week away in Devonshire. I was bound to write home or return at once, or my father would wonder what in the world had become of me, and might be advertising for his only son in the agony columns, as missing since such and such a date.

As it was I anticipated considerable vexation at the Rectory when I did return. But whatever censure I incurred, I felt that I could not have acted otherwise than I had done.

CHAPTER XXVII.

TWO SUSPICIOUS STRANGERS

THE ninth morning of my stay at Combe-Ratton was wet and boisterous, and not at all inviting for the usual five-miles' walk to the "Haven of White Roses," as I had named Mattie's hiding-place. Nevertheless I started at my customary time after breakfast from the "Seagull," in the teeth of a biting nor'-easter, which drove the sleet into my face like stinging whips.

As I approached a narrow gorge, at the mouth of one of the valleys I have described, I saw two men on horseback, some distance ahead of me. They were halted, and seemed to be contemplating the rocks above them. On drawing nearer, however, the reason for their doing so was explained, and I heard the following dialogue taking place:

"Who are you, you daft fool, that dare to stop us?"

"Never ye mind who I be. Devil take ye, I wain't let ye goo by here till I knoo your business!"

This answer came from some one posted among the crags overhead, and on looking up I saw "the boy" standing in a threatening attitude, with his old smooth-bore deliberately levelled at the men.

"You'll answer for this, my fine fellow. Drop that muzzle at once, d'ye hear, and let us pass."

"D——d if I do! not if ye stand telling wi' me a month!"

I took in the situation directly. I remembered now

while breakfasting at the inn to have seen two strange men pass the window; when I say strange, I mean that they didn't look like natives—one can generally tell. I thought nothing of it at the time, stupidly enough, but now I knew who they were. So did "the boy." Then they had come at last. I was only thankful that I had overtaken them, and was in time to prepare my poor darling for the rude shock that awaited her, and to encourage her by my presence.

I now stepped forward, to put an end to Jim Carew's well-meant but ill-advised interference.

"Come down from there at once, Jim—*that's* no use!" I called out, persuasively rather than angrily, for I appreciated the fellow's motive in wishing to stop the men, though it was a hare-brained idea.

"Thank you, sir," said one of the strangers to me politely—a quiet, respectable-looking man, whom I took to be the chief personage. "You know the feller, do you, sir? He's mad, I suppose?"

"No, not exactly mad," I replied; "only a bit eccentric. Don't think anything of it; he means well."

"So it seems, sir."

"Fegs, then, if *you* be telling to me to coom down, mister, and let mun goo, why so be," holloaed "the boy," adding, in disgust: "Who did ever! Never thought *you'd* cave in thikketheor aways, that I daint—thought you'd be thankin' me for the job—blast my, etc., etc.;" and, muttering some very strong language, he descended, with a bad grace, from his sentry-post.

"Oblige me by not taking any notice of his foolishness," I said apart to the detective. "I know what you want; I'll come with you."

I saw the man looking at me in some surprise, then rather suspiciously, as though he thought this was only a

ruse to draw him off the right track; but I quickly undeceived him. To attempt to evade the law now was, I well knew, neither practicable nor politic.

"You will find Miss Freith at a cottage a little further on," I volunteered.

"We know that, sir, thank you."

I wondered from whom they had "received their information."

"And if you will allow me," I continued, "I'll inform her first of your arrival—break it to her gently, you understand. She is a friend of mine."

"Very good, sir, certainly."

The man seemed satisfied as to my honest intentions, and we proceeded on our way, "the boy" bringing up the rear at a respectful distance for a mile, then suddenly disappearing. Perhaps he thought better of remaining too long in such close propinquity to these menials of justice.

Last night, I also remembered now, the autumn sun went down in wild, lurid clouds, portending stormy weather. Mattie, who is superstitious of such signs, said she knew it was an omen of evil, and that something dreadful was going to happen. I tried to laugh her out of the imagination, but she returned to it more than once during the evening. Remembering this, then, I hoped she would be the better prepared for the reality.

* * * * * * *

It is past; there was no scene, I am thankful to say. Mattie bore up bravely when she knew the worst.

I went on ahead to the cottage, as arranged with Markby, the detective, and found her watching for me as usual. Directly I appeared she seemed to guess the truth; my anxious face, which I could not mask, betrayed me to her quick eyes. She anticipated the words upon my lips.

"Ha! it has come at last," she said. "I know; you need not tell me."

"It has, Mattie," I answered, "but don't be frightened, my poor darling. Thank heaven, I am with you—trust me, all will be well yet, you need not fear."

"I do not." She smiled faintly; her face was white to the lips as Parian, but the extraordinary calm she displayed at that trying moment astonished me.

The angry sunset over-night had evidently been taken by her as a faithful herald of this impending event, and she expected nothing less.

On the other hand, Lola La Touche appeared dreadfully upset, thoroughly frightened and astonished when she knew the truth. Her abject nervousness was in strong contrast to Mattie's fortitude, but I thought none the worse of Lola for her sympathetic fears for her friend.

As for Dame Carew, she subsided utterly in presence of Markby and his colleague, and after a few fussy words of condolence to Mattie disappeared altogether from the scene; at any rate, for a time, until she had partially recovered from the first feeling of panic.

Her trepidation was not unnatural; it arose from a very sufficient but less worthy cause—self. Conscience, that wholesale manufacturer of cowards, no doubt reminded the old *contrebandière* of the long-outstanding account between herself and the Crown, which, through present circumstances, she might be called upon to settle inconveniently. But the business of its representatives to-day was not with her. How much longer respite she and her law-defying son may be allowed to enjoy together in their cosy retreat has nothing to do with this tale.

Markby, the detective, was a gentleman at heart, a courteous, considerate fellow for one of his calling, and

seemed anxious to meet me in every way possible. No doubt he felt that this was a peculiar and exceptional case, and was really sorry for his fair prisoner. At my request he left all arrangements for the journey to me, glad enough, perhaps, to be relieved of that trouble. Lola and I were to escort Mattie to Kellingsby with him, and for her appearance before the magistrates when called upon, I undertook to find the requisite bail.

We could not leave till the following day, as I was obliged to return to Combe-Ratton, to charter ponies to take the ladies there, and a conveyance on. Consequently, the two strangers had to be billeted for the night, a necessity not altogether appreciated either by the old woman or her son. Indeed, I had some misgiving as to what might happen to the men of the law during the dark hours. But they, I expect, had none; they were accustomed to carry their lives in their hands, and thought little of danger even from a murderous lunatic, such as they had good reason to suppose "the boy." I was relieved on my arrival in the morning to find that the night had passed in peace.

Before we left the cottage, I had a private talk with Mrs. Carew, and offered to pay what was left owing by the ladies for their accommodation. But to my surprise she refused to take another farthing.

"No, fegs, you'm needing all your money for the poor young lady, sir, thanking you the same," she said, with a respectful curtsey; "as to me, I've been paid fair already. Oh, deary, deary! who did ever! Us be poor folk enough, sir, but I know to goodness I be sooner to take them in for nought, than this should ha' happened in *my* house."

Which I could quite understand. I gave her all credit,

nevertheless, for declining further payment, though her generous scruples became rather qualified in my eyes by what I afterwards learnt.

"The boy" himself, however, who sneaked up at the last moment to see us off, was not above accepting a couple of sovereigns, which I slipped into his hand as I bid him good-bye, receiving in exchange a volley of encouraging winks, and a whispered "Good luck to ye, sir, and t' young leddy tu, and bloody end to her enemies!"

"The boy's" remark was forcible, and, I've no doubt, sincere.

And so we bid farewell to our queer Devonshire acquaintances and their pretty cottage, where we had spent some smiling days together, in defiance of the dark frowning anxiety which stared us grimly in the face and now asserted its stern authority.

We started at nine o'clock, on a chill, blustery October morning, I walking between the two girls on the ponies, Markby and his *confrère* riding together in rear. To all appearances we might have been a pleasure party out for a day's excursion, and for that we were most likely taken by those who saw us. Would to heaven their supposition had been correct!

It was a strange journey, not easily to be forgotten, that of ours from wild, picturesque Exmoor to the comparatively uninteresting town of Kellingsby and its surroundings, accompanied as we were by two police detectives. We went back by a different route from that by which I had come, taking the sea to Bristol, and on through Gloucester, Worcester, and Birmingham, at which latter place Mr. Markby dismissed his confederate. It seemed difficult to realise the situation—that dear Mattie, sitting there opposite to me, so pale and sad, yet thoroughly dignified, was

actually a prisoner, and that the attentive Markby, who behaved far more like a personal friend than a policeman, was her custodian of the hour. But at this critical epoch of the story details of such journey might rather arrest than promote interest, so my goose's quill shall skim the distance faster than the swiftest flight of swallow.

From Bristol I telegraphed to my father to meet me at Kellingsby on an urgent matter, and so worded the telegram that he might guess what that matter was. Angry though I knew he would be with me for the independent step I had taken, I felt confident that pity for a defenceless girl in this terrible hour of extremity would overrule all other feelings, and that he would not refuse us his counsel and help. I judged him rightly.

CHAPTER XXVII.

IN THE HOUR OF NEED

I DO not purpose to draw any graphic or highly coloured picture of that painful scene at the magistrate's examination, which was held on the third day after our arrival—of the crowded hall, the gaping people, the wigged barristers, the startling evidence (already given at the inquest), of the calm and respectful demeanour of the prisoner, the dear, sweet-looking girl—treasured love of my soul—to-day the cynosure of every curious eye. It was naturally a *cause célèbre*, an inquiry of a highly sensational character, that the grand-daughter of one of the squires of the neighbourhood should stand there in the dock, arraigned on the charge of the manslaughter of her grandfather. But even though scenes of police investigations had not been already described *ad nauseam* in a legion of fictions, I could neither have the nerve nor patience to dwell here upon the harsh particulars. It is more than enough for me to have to say that Mattie was adjudged guilty, and committed for trial at the following assizes.

I was utterly shocked and disappointed; for, though I apprehended more than once during the examination that the case was going against her, I fully anticipated an acquittal in the end—that the coroner's jury having returned an open verdict, the magistrate would at least have given her the benefit of the doubt.

From the moment he pronounced the fatal words, I

looked upon that stolid old justice as my deadliest enemy, and railed in the bitterness of my heart at his crass stupidity for coming to any conclusion so opposed to my own convictions. I firmly believed that a strong prejudice against Mattie had entered his old-fashioned skull on account of her Italian origin, and that he probably looked upon her as a sort of modern Lucretia Borgia or Beatrice Cenci, and altogether a dangerous person to be at large.

Mattie was ably represented by one of the cleverest barristers of the day, a personal acquaintance of my father, whom we procured especially for her defence. But though this eminent counsel cross-examined Captain Zollern, the principal witness, at great length and with consummate skill, there was no shaking him in his evidence, and no getting over that one damning point of the letter-weight having been found on the floor—with a mark of blood upon it—together with the dead mongoose. Moreover, the provocation shown went further to prove the act of violence, Nothing urged by Mattie herself through the lips of her counsel could avail against that fatal point, for that she had not the slightest remembrance of having thrown the brass weight was no confutation of the deed. Lola La Touche was now an additional witness for the prosecution on behalf of the Treasury, and her evidence, given with much reluctance and hesitation, was unfortunately corroborative.

The hidden mystery contained in the deceased butler's deposition, duly put in and read, received little consideration by the magistrate; he evidently took the same view of it as the coroner had done, and did not treat it as bearing on the question at issue. As to the supposed robbery of the nine thousand pounds, this was very promptly got rid of by counsel as utterly absurd and irrelevant, and ought not, he argued, to be discussed seriously for one single

moment to the prejudice of the prisoner. To this opinion the magistrate deferred, though it made no difference to his ultimate decision.

On application being submitted for bail, Captain Zollern immediately stepped forward and offered himself in any sum that the magistrate might nominate. But this offer was declined by counsel, under instructions there and then received, and eventually Mattie was admitted to bail on my father and I becoming sureties in the sum of two hundred pounds each.

Now that she had lost her fortune, and was virtually penniless, and almost friendless, there was no fear of any ill-natured tongue saying that what we did in her behoof was done with an interested motive. Hence my father, who was very sensitive of public opinion, decided, though not without some demur, to take this step with me. He was very fond of my poor Mattie, I well knew, and desired to befriend her in every way possible, so yielded to my persuasion in this. But he could not and would not go further in granting my earnest wish that she should come home with us to the Rectory and stay there pending the trial. I was angry at the time for his refusal, but on calm reflection saw that it was only reasonable under all circumstances. Besides, his acceding to such a request would have been tantamount to tacit approval of our plighted love, which now seemed more hopeless than ever, and, in his eyes, more undesirable.

When Mattie knew the worst, her brave spirit gave way at last. In this dark hour she needed all the most encouraging sympathy and loving care that could be bestowed upon her; and I dreaded, with a clutching at my heart, what the consequences might be of the cruel tension to an already overwrought nervous system.

Lola still refused to leave her side, and I had taken comfortable rooms for them together in a quiet part of the town. These, however, they were not destined to occupy for long, for two days after the magistrate's inquiry a lady presented herself at the house, and said she desired to see Miss Freith. I happened to be there at the time, standing in the narrow entrance-hall, and after a moment recognised the visitor. It was Miss Pridden—the poor little governess who had received her *congé* through us a few years ago, who had been summarily dismissed from Gaunchester-Haugh by its inexorable master for acting a good-natured part to Mattie and me in the early days of our love!

I stepped forward at once and held out my hand, exclaiming in some surprise:

"Is it possible? Miss Pridden!"

"Ah, Mr. Kelso, is that you?" she said, with an anxious face and flurried voice. "Oh, I'm *so* glad to see you! Oh, where is my dear child? Pray let me go to her. I am longing to see her, and comfort her in this awful distress. I have been abroad with a family for some time past, and only heard of it all yesterday on our return to London. So I came down here at once to my sister's, to see if I could do anything for the poor child. I was afraid she was in prison, and was so relieved when my sister told me she was not. We want her to come and stay with us directly, Mr. Kelso," the good little lady ran on breathlessly; "I've got a long holiday, and shall be with my sister, Mrs. Leghorne, of The Priory, for some weeks, and we shall be only too glad to do all we possibly can to make poor dear Mattie happy and comfortable. From what I well remember of the past, I feel convinced that this shocking calamity was not through any fault of hers. And oh, Mr. Kelso, *what* do you think will happen to her?

what will they give her? Oh, *won't* they let her off—so young, so tried, and so alone in the world?"

As soon as Miss Pridden would allow me to get in a sentence, I assured her I had every hope that, notwithstanding the result of the magisterial inquiry, a jury would come to a different opinion, and at all events that the case would be dealt with very leniently. These words seemed to make the kind-hearted governess happier. I now took her upstairs to see her old pupil.

It was a touching meeting between them, and Mattie was greatly affected, though she did not show it to the same extent as did the highly impressible Miss Pridden, who was so overcome by her emotion, that it was a considerable time before she could explain the chief object of her visit.

When she did so at last, Mattie expressed her grateful appreciation of the offer, and said she would gladly have accepted it, but that she and her friend had taken these rooms together. Thereupon Miss Pridden cordially extended the invitation to Lola, who, however, gracefully declined, saying that as dear Mattie had found these kind friends so opportunely, she herself would run over to her people in Paris for a little while, as they were anxious to see her, but that she would certainly return before *the* day, so as to be with Mattie at that anxious time; and, finally, it was arranged between them that the latter should remove the same afternoon to the comfortable house of Miss Pridden's widowed sister, about a mile out of the town.

As yet Gaunchester-Haugh remained unsold, and though freely advertised at a far lower figure, no purchaser came forward. Then it was given out that the estate would be parcelled off into lots for building purposes, and

the house knocked down to the highest bidder, to which effect auctioneer's bills presently appeared. Meanwhile, Captain Zollern still haunted the neighbourhood, making the "Peacock" his headquarters. I met him on various occasions riding a handsome chestnut horse, which he had lately purchased from one of the county magnates. On the day after the inquiry he actually had the effrontery to call upon Mattie, who, of course, declined to see him. But he was not to be rebuffed, and his visit was immediately followed up by a hypocritical letter of sympathy, in which he expressed his sincere sorrow for her painful position, regrets that he had been compelled to appear against her, and professions of what he meant to do for her benefit as soon as the estate should be disposed of. Mattie would not even look at the letter, but handed it to me to read, and then requested me to put it in the fire.

Captain Zollern's chief reason, I soon ascertained, for hanging about the place, was to persevere in his hitherto unsuccessful search for the missing bank-notes. His hoped-for agent in the discovery, Mattie's jackdaw, had lately disappeared, having with good taste declined to act as the usurper's confederate, and so left that individual to his own resources.

On the third day after Mattie had gone to the Priory, she asked me if I would mind going over into the old yew-walks at Gaunchester-Haugh to visit her mother's tomb. She had had a strange dream about it, she said, the previous night, in which she had seen the man Zollern pulling the tomb to pieces. Now I had no faith in these deceptions of the imagination when reason drops the reins, and told her that I thought any such act of desecration as that revealed to her was quite improbable; that Captain Zollern had no possible object in effacing

the monument, and that she might feel sure it would be left unmolested. But I could not get her away from that dream. She would not be satisfied until I promised to go and see for myself that her mother's grave was untouched. Accordingly I undertook to do so at any risk of my trespass being objected to, and getting warned off the premises.

Mattie still remained in ignorance of the true secret of that obscure burial-place—the why her mother had been laid to rest in that strange sequestered spot. When in Devonshire she had questioned me on this subject, but I did not think it right or kind to enlighten her, and was obliged to pretend that I knew nothing about it. Why should I tell her poor darling, whose young head was already bowed with far more than her share of human sorrow and suffering? Better she should never know, or if she must, only at some distant and happier time.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE AVENGING HAND

After luncheon next day I set forth from the Rectory to comply with Mattie's wish, and explore that dark forest of yews lying across the river in search of the tomb, for as yet I had never seen it.

Since I came back from North Devon there had been some violent equinoctial gales and storms, and the floods had been very heavy. But to-day was fine, and the river had subsided as rapidly as it always rose, leaving the meadows besprinkled with silt and the flotsam and jetsam brought down by its yellow waters. As I was crossing the bridge I paused, and leaning over its side, gazed down at the old Furion rushing swiftly underneath the ivy-covered arches. Whilst I watched it my thoughts went back to that day, seven or eight years ago, when Mattie and I met for the first time in our lives, and entered upon that exciting Oxford and Cambridge boat-race with two logs of wood, afterwards sealing our acquaintance with a feast of blackberries. How well I remembered the day, and since then what an immense deal we have both been through! Presently my thoughts went still further back, to twenty years ago, to that wild autumn evening when, as a wee lad of four, I stood with my father beside the racing river, and was terrified out of my wits by seeing a woman throw herself into the angry flood—still more terrified afterwards when they brought her dead body

up to the Rectory. Sad, gruesome memory! I might well wish to hide it from her daughter.

Now that I reflect, I remember it is almost the anniversary of that dreadful event twenty years ago when Mattie's mother "discharged her soul, and gave it furlough for another world." And to-day I am going up to see her tomb for the first time. Strange coincidence!

The afternoon is mild for the late season, the air soft and ambient, and filled with the pungent but pleasant aromatic odour of fallen leaves. The woods, so beautiful in their death, have not yet thrown off their variegated robes and exposed their wintry nakedness. There have been no sharp frosts as yet, or the fierce storms of the last few days would have gone far to strip the branches bare ere now.

I leave the bridge, and go on my way up into the private grounds of Gaunchester-Haugh. The old house and garden look sad and desolate to a degree. Most of the windows are barred and shuttered, and present a dreary front to the wan sunlight.

The grounds, never well kept, are rapidly falling into a state of wilderness. The carriage-drive and gravel paths are green with weeds, the flower-beds overrun with sprawling rose-bushes, intermingled with groundsel and sow-thistle. The damp spongy lawns are unmown and unswept; the moles have thrown up their little brown hillocks in retired corners beneath the laburnums and mulberry-trees; the mossy turf and neglected paths are strewn with rotting leaves; decay is on every side, with an odour of death in the air.

Round about the chimneys and ivied gables the starlings chatter and fly from point to point, popping in and out of the holes of the walls, and making much ado over their forsaken nests. Up among the high elms

the rooks wheel and caw, and hold their solemn conferences, whilst on the green-moulded step outside the study window, a thrush is dining off a wriggling worm, all heedless of the fatal room behind, now closed in darkness.

A feeling of depression came over me as I looked around, and I passed on, walking quickly away from the house towards the walks to get my visit over. I did not care to linger longer than I could help in these gloomy, deserted grounds, associated as they were with so much sadness to her who had once called the place her home.

Mattie had described to me where the tomb lay hidden away among the dark junipers, or I might have been overtaken by twilight ere I found it.

As I drew near the spot I was startled by hearing the clink, clink of iron against stone. Good heavens! could this be my imagination, or had Mattie's dream come true? Had it really been sent to her as a warning? The clinking ceased for a few moments, and in its stead I heard voices; then again it went on. There was no fancy about this; the sounds were real enough. I stepped stealthily forward and peered through the trees. Yes, as I live, there was Zollern stooping over the tomb, from which the ivy had been torn away in long strips. A crowbar was in his hand, and he was in the very act of trying to lever up the slab from the brickwork. A woman, with her back towards me, stood by watching him. Ah! surely I knew that figure! I could swear to it anywhere!

The stone was firmly fixed and heavy—it refused to move. Zollern paused and wiped the perspiration from his forehead. Then he said something to his companion; I could just distinguish the disjointed sentences: "Don't believe it's possible, after all—old man—could never have done it—waste of time—but we'll make sure." She murmured a low reply, and he resumed his efforts.

Mattie's words were in my ears; I must stop this sacrilege at once. I pushed forward rapidly through the thick evergreens that fenced in the spot. The heavy rustling warned them; they both started and turned towards me but I was not yet clear of the dark foliage; they could not see, they could only hear me.

The woman at once gave a suppressed scream, and gliding swiftly away from the tomb, vanished through the trees on the opposite side. But I had seen her face, as I had previously recognised her figure. It was Lola La Touche!

Instantly a suspicion of the truth seized me, and held me spellbound for a moment. That woman was a traitress! She *was* in league with this man—this scheming foreign scoundrel—in league against Mattie Freith. Then Mattie's first suspicion was only too well founded. It was all clear to me now.

Zollern stood looking askance in my direction, with the crowbar lowered but still in his hand. I stepped forward and let him see who I was.

"What shameful work is this?" I exclaimed, advancing upon him. "Leave that tomb alone!"

"Ha! and who are you, sir, that presumes to dictate to a man on his own property?"

He tried to carry it off with a high hand, but his face had turned perfectly livid.

"This is no property of yours," I replied; "this is the grave of Miss Freith's mother. You have no right to touch it, and by heaven you *shall* not!"

"And pray, has Miss Freith constituted you her agent in this matter?" he asked, in a sneering tone. "Or by what authority do you interfere?"

"On my own authority," I returned; "on the respon-

sibility of one who discovers a foreign blackguard daring to desecrate an English grave."

"Damn you, you hot-headed fool I'm not hurting the tomb! Stand off!" He clutched the crowbar convulsively as I towered threateningly above him. "Stand off, I say! Mind your own business and leave these premises at once. Your insulting words I'll answer elsewhere."

"By G—d, you shall answer them here!" I cried, with concentrated fury. "Ha! would you?"

He had raised the iron to strike, but I was too quick for him. I seized his uplifted arm with my right hand and held it as in a vice, and with the left hit him with all my force full between the eyes. He dropped the crowbar with an oath, and we grappled fiercely together.

During the tussle I heard a frightened scream behind me, and had some dim knowledge of a woman's voice imploring us to desist; but I was too infuriate to heed anything else than the man writhing in my arms. He was no match for me in strength, and in a few seconds I had forced him backwards (though inadvertently) on to the tomb itself, and held him down there tightly by the throat. Again I heard that terrified woman's voice, but now some distance away, shrieking out frantically for help.

In Zollern's struggles to get free, he managed to draw out something—a knife or dagger. I saw it glitter in his hand, and like lightning struck it from his grasp, only just in time to save it from being plunged into my heart.

"You murderous villain!" I hissed out through my grinding teeth, and I redoubled the force of my grasp with

both hands. I had no mercy on him now—I buried my fingers deeply in his throat till his face turned black, his eyes started from their sockets, and the blood gushed from his nose and mouth.

"Steady there, steady! Don't kill the man! What's up, eh?"

I heard the words, but I was like a wild animal in my fury, and never slackened my terrible grip for an instant. Without a doubt I should have killed him—he would have been a dead man in another three minutes—but for the providential intervention of two pairs of powerful hands which were now laid upon me from behind.

"Let go! let go!" thundered a deep voice in my ear, and I felt myself forcibly dragged off my now almost unconscious antagonist, and hurled violently to one side.

Frightfully excited as I was, my first impulse was to turn on those who had seized me.

"Take care, sir, for God's sake—keep off!"

It was not this warning, but what I now beheld, that controlled my rage, and made me stand aloof in the sudden fascination of concern and interest. There was Zollern, looking like a corpse, with the blood trickling from his mouth, leaning panting against the tomb, and Lola La Touche with her arms around him, supporting his sinking form, whilst with ashen lips she moaned out words of anguish and sympathy; and beside them stood two men, waiting quietly, significantly.

It was a painful tableau, real, terrible, and dramatic.

"He'll be better presently, sir," said one of the men, a tall, wiry-looking fellow, addressing me in an undertone; "but by the powers above, you nearly did for him."

After a while Zollern recovered sufficiently to look about him. Putting Lola gently aside with one arm, he stared

at the two men with a half-dazed, half-inquiring look. The tall one, who had just spoken to me, answered that look.

"No, I don't think you know *us*," said he, gazing steadily into the eyes of the ghastly white face turned towards him, "but we know *you!*" There was a slight pause—then he advanced a pace and put his hand quietly on Zollern's shoulder. "In the Queen's name, I arrest you, Waller Freith, *alias* Heinrich Zollern, on a charge of wilful murder!"

Those words darted through me like an electric shock. The veil of mystery was torn aside at last. Those formal words explained all!

As Lola La Touche heard them, she uttered a cry of horror.

"Oh, merciful heavens! what have I done?" she exclaimed.

Her screams had drawn these men to the spot; she thought she had helped to bring about the arrest.

Zollern never spoke, but with the gray hues of death upon his features, stared in bewilderment from one to the other. At last he gasped out:

"What!—what is it you say?"

"You heard." And at the same time the detective drew something from his pocket. In another second Zollern's wrists were in the handcuffs.

Lola La Touche witnessed this with wild, panic-stricken eyes; she appeared completely paralysed with terror, her body swayed to and fro, and she snatched at the ivy behind her on the end of the tomb to save herself from sinking to the ground.

"Take them off, you fool! take them off!" cried Zollern indignantly, and wrestling with the handcuffs; "what do you mean by this? Who do you want?—*I m*

not your man. What did you say just now? How could I understand when that d—d madman there had nearly choked the life out of me? What was it? Repeat it!"

The detective did so.

"Waller Freith! wilful murder! good God!" Then in a quieter tone Zollern added: "Ah, well, the man's beyond your reach—dead!—he died in my presence months ago."

"I dare say he did," said the officer coolly, "but he's come to life again, and he's speaking to us now. There, it's no use—*we* know all about it."

"You think so; but you'll find you're utterly mistaken," exclaimed Zollern, again excitedly; "however, do what you like, only take these infernal things off. I'll go with you quietly enough without them; you'll soon find out your mistake, I tell you!"

"I think not; if we do, all the better for you; but they must stop on."

"Oh, very well, as you will," shrugging his shoulders with a foreign gesture; "take me at your risk. You'll have to answer for this."

"Very good, we'll run that risk; we shall know more about it presently—so'll you."

Zollern now stepped back suddenly from between the two men to speak to Lola. They saw his intention, and did not attempt to prevent him. He murmured something to her in a low tone. The words "*Au revoir*—Paris—trust me—all will come right," just reached my ears, but I question whether she heard as much. Her head was now drooped on her bosom; she never lifted her eyes to his face; she seemed to have fallen into a trance. Twice he called her by name, but she made no answer. He stood looking at her without again speaking, until

one of the detectives touched him on the arm to remind him that they waited.

Meanwhile, the taller of the two men, who was standing next to me, murmured in my ear :

"Sorry to shock that lady, whoever she is, but she's well quit of *him*. I think it's devilish lucky we dropped in upon you when we did, sir, or he'd have given us the slip, and you'd be now standing in his shoes ;" then, turning from me to Zollern, he added, in a tone of authority, "now then, if you're ready, we needn't waste any more time here."

Thereupon the detectives moved off with their now unresisting prisoner. As they passed me, Zollern was looking back over his shoulder at Lola, but suddenly his eyes fell upon me, when he said, with a deadly smile :

"Ah, you owe me my revenge, Mr. Kelso ; next time we will meet as gentlemen, not prize-fighters."

I did not care to hit a man when he was down, and allowed him and his escort to disappear through the trees without making any retort.

CHAPTER XXX.

A DOVE-FEATHER'D RAVEN.

O serpent heart, hid with a flow'ring face!
Did ever dragon keep so fair a case?
. . . . . .
Dove-feather'd raven! wolvish ravening lamb!
Despised substance of divinest show!
. . . . . .
Was ever book, containing such vile matter,
So fairly bound? Oh, that deceit should dwell
In such a gorgeous palace!

I WAS left alone with Lola La Touche beside the tomb. Neither spoke for long after the others had gone—a painful silence ensued, during which I could hear their footsteps gradually dying away in the distance.

Though appearances damned her so thoroughly, and I felt as sure of her treachery and deceit as I did of Mattie's love and truthfulness, yet she was only a woman—a woman in obvious agony, half-swooning before my eyes; I could not help pitying, though at heart I must despise her.

"Miss La Touche," I said at last gently, "take my arm—come away from here."

"Oh, my God! my God!" she groaned, apparently not hearing me. "Oh, it cannot be true—this is too awful—it cannot be true!"

I did not speak again for a few minutes; I wished to give her time to recover herself; but presently I asked:

"How did you come here? Have you any conveyance waiting for you? If so, let me take you to it."

"Oh, no, no! Pray leave me—pray let me go back alone."

"I cannot do that. You are dreadfully upset. I must help you, if you will allow me."

"But indeed I'd rather not. You cannot do anything for me. I know my way to the village, thank you. There is a fly waiting at the inn. Good-bye—excuse me, Mr. Kelso, I don't mean to be rude."

But I was not to be dismissed so easily. No wonder she wished to avoid an interview with me. In justice to Mattie I was bound to find out all.

I waited yet a while longer till she appeared to have grown calmer; then I said quietly:

"Miss La Touche, I have no wish to pain you, but will you explain?"

"Explain what? There is nothing much to explain," she replied, almost petulantly; "but surely you can't expect me to answer questions or talk coherently now, after what has just taken place?"

"I only want you to tell me this," I persisted: "how is it I find you here to-day with—that man?"

"He asked me to meet him on this spot for a particular reason; I was interested in that reason and came—that's all."

"What reason?"

"Well, if you must know, he thought those lost bank-notes might be hidden away in this tomb. I thought so too. He found it had been disturbed lately, the ivy loosened, and the mortar renewed. He asked Nathan, the gardener, about it, who told him that one morning a few weeks ago he discovered some of his garden tools lying here, the ivy pulled down in places, and marks on the stone-work as if somebody had been picking at it with a pick-axe. Nathan says he reported it to General Crutwell,

who was very angry and perplexed about the matter, which neither could account for, and ordered him to restore the ivy to its place as well as he could, and repair the mortar. This he did, but Captain Zollern detected the other day that somebody had been tampering with the tomb. He consulted me about it, and we came to the conclusion that it must have been the General himself—that he had buried away those notes in here somehow, while walking in his sleep one night. But when we came to look closely we changed our minds, we didn't think it possible. To make sure, however, Captain Zollern meant to open it and see; and that's what he was trying to do when you came upon us and assaulted him in such a violent and unjustifiable manner."

I let that remark pass; I didn't think it necessary to defend what I had done. While she was speaking I examined the tomb myself, and agreed that it was *not* possible, and that the slab had never been removed.

"Well, so much for that," I said; "the nine thousand pounds are not there, I'll engage to say, and I don't think Captain Zollern is likely to find them now——"

Do you mean that he'll never come back?" she asked quickly; "you cannot suppose for an instant that he's guilty of—of what they said? Oh, heavens, no, it's all some frightful, horrible mistake—it *must* be—he will easily clear himself."

"Pardon me, Miss La Touche," I said, "but your agitation speaks for itself." A pause. "There is more between you and that man than you would have us know"

I saw her brow contract painfully, but she did not answer me for a moment.

"Your silence admits it," I continued, after another

pause. "Then being his friend and confederate—perhaps I may say lover"—again she winced—"you can be no friend to Mattie Freith, and you have been playing a double part towards her all along——"

"I have not—not in the way you think," she interrupted hurriedly.

"Indeed, I must say more," I continued—"a deeply treacherous and cruel part——"

At this she turned on me indignantly.

"How dare you say such a thing, Mr. Kelso? You have no right to say such a thing! I have neither been treacherous nor cruel towards Mattie. I have been most strangely situated—most awkwardly situated, but all along I have meant to do my best for her—to protect her interests rather than mar them. You *don't* understand, and—and I can't explain——"

"Why can't you? Excuse me, but you *must* explain."

"There is no must in the matter, Mr. Kelso. I shall certainly not be coerced into doing so."

"But in justice to yourself, I mean, you are bound to give me an explanation," I added, amending my sentence.

"I—I tell you I cannot; I cannot without betraying a confidence, an important secret—though you'll know it soon enough now, perhaps—at any rate, it's not *my* place to tell you—yet——"

"Why not? If I am to know it soon, why can't you tell me at once?"

"Don't press me, please. Oh, I—I feel so flurried, I scarcely know what I am saying. As to my being no true friend to Mattie," she went on hastily, as if anxious to get away from the other subject, "surely you ought

to think differently in the face of all I have done lately. To take her off with me out of danger (as I hoped), and become buried alive in a far-away corner of the world for her sake all these weeks, is some little proof of friendship, I should think."

"I don't dispute that, certainly; but you must pardon me if I say that in doing so you have done her far more harm than good. I wonder you never thought of that at the time. The very fact of her having taken flight is bound to go against her at the trial. Did it really never occur to you that it would?"

"No, it didn't; besides, I never imagined she would be found where we were going to, as it was such a very remote spot, and——"

"But I thought you had no idea where you were going until after you'd started?"

"True; but of course I—I meant to choose some such place——" She hesitated and coloured. A new suspicion flashed across me.

"Miss La Touche, be candid with me," I said. "Was it your own idea to take Mattie off in that manner?"

"Well—no—not altogether."

"Then who suggested it?" I had to repeat the question before she answered.

"Oh, you may as well know, I suppose," she said at last. "Captain Zollern." I started. "He was extremely anxious for Mattie's safety; and I'm sure you will give him every credit when I tell you that he behaved most kindly in the matter, provided me with money, told me where to go to, and gave me a letter for Mrs. Carew——"

"Captain Zollern did all that, did he?"

"Yes; he knew her very well, he said, and that she was the very person we wanted. What I mentioned about

meeting that friend at Liverpool was a quibble; the friend, of course, was Captain Zollern, and he paid the old woman a handsome sum for keeping us there, promising to communicate with me as soon as he thought it safe for us to move. But he didn't wish to compromise himself, and be accused hereafter of conniving at Mattie's escape, so begged me to keep my own counsel about his having had anything to do with it. I give you this, then, in confidence, Mr. Kelso—not that it so much matters now, perhaps——"

"Perhaps not," I replied; nor could I pledge myself to respect that confidence under the circumstances. "And what was his motive, do you suppose, for getting you to take Mattie away?"

"Well, as I told you, he was very anxious for her sake, and alarmed at the prospect of her being arrested for having caused the death of her grandfather—naturally so—any man would feel the same about his own daugh——" She stopped herself abruptly.

"His own daughter! Then he *is* Waller Freith?"

"He is. It is useless to deny it, for of course his identity will now be proved, false though the awful charge must be against him."

"Ah, then the police are not mistaken in their man, if they are as to the charge?"

I really fancied they might have been, for the moment; his plausible self-possession almost took me in.

"Yes, Mr. Kelso, he *is* Waller Freith," Lola La Touche repeated, "and in that fact you hold the key to all. No doubt you and Mattie will think that he has behaved in a selfish and unnatural manner, but let me vindicate him in that. He saw that by Mattie's determined opposition to her grandfather's wishes, she was ruining

her prospects—had ruined them, in fact, and forfeited all chance of inheriting his money and estates. Consequently, Captain Zollern—I'll still call him so—thought it best for her, and due to himself, as the General's son-in-law, to try to prevent the property from going away from them altogether, and so played his cards to supplant her in the will, with the intention of amply providing for her out of it. Had he not done this, neither he nor she might ever have touched a farthing."

"But how was it he came down to Gaunchester-Haugh in that extraordinary manner?"

"I'm going to tell you. He came in the first instance to try and win the game for himself: he had a double motive, ambition and revenge; but when he found his daughter here, he decided to play it out for their joint benefit. It was a bold plan, but I needn't tell you he is not a man to stick at trifles. He had never forgotten nor forgiven his father-in-law's insulting repulse years ago, after the death of Mattie's mother. For *that* he was bent on taking reprisal. Moreover, he was hard up at this time, and anticipating that the old man, in the ordinary course of things, would soon be going out of the world, he decided that if it were done, then 'twere well it were done quickly. The rest, perhaps, you can now understand—for mystery read strategy."

No, I thought to myself, I could *not* understand all yet.

"Soon after he came," she went on—and here her cheek grew scarlet—"he declared his love to me, and soon after that again I detected his clever disguise, the false moustache, etc., which were barely discernible even on the closest scrutiny. Then he confessed who he was, trusting to me to keep his secret, which I promised to

do. Eventually he made me an offer of marriage, and we became privately engaged, from which time I did all in my power to aid and abet him in his design, both for Mattie's sake and his own."

"And yours," I could not help adding, rather sarcastically.

"Well—yes—his interests would be mine; but he didn't wish to divulge our engagement until all this painful affair was over. And now you know everything, Mr. Kelso, and can imagine my agony at this moment at his dreadful position. I have done my best to tell you the truth in justice to myself and others, but you have forced it from me at a terrible time, with my thoughts distracted as they are; so forgive me if I have been incoherent. I really feel too frightened and nervous to talk any more now, but I—I'll see you again. Will you explain to Mattie for me, or if you wish I'll tell her myself by-and-by; but now I can think of nothing but this fearful charge against him—oh, what does it mean, Mr. Kelso? What *can* it mean?"

"God only knows!" I said. "We shall learn."

She was greatly excited, and became more and more agitated as her thoughts dwelt upon Zollern's arrest. I tried to calm her in vain, but she no longer refused my escort to the village inn, where we now repaired, when I put her into the fly which took her back to Kellingsby. She did not invite me, and I did not offer, to drive with her (although I intended going myself into the town at once), but asked me to call on her the next day at the principal hotel, where she was now staying, and I arranged to do so.

During our walk together from Gaunchester-Haugh to the village no conversation passed. Lola La Touche was

silent, save for an agonised murmur now and again showing the acute state of her feelings, whilst I was lost in meditation, my brain alive with a thousand thoughts.

I knew that this woman had not told me all, that she was keeping something back. Why had she not revealed the truth before to Mattie, if she meant fairly towards her? That she had been guilty of base treachery and deceit was beyond question. Her version of affairs did not blind me to that fact. Many a suspected act of hers against Mattie now recurred to my mind and stood stripped to the eye. I doubted very strongly if we should ever have known the unvarnished truth had it not been dragged into broad light by the events of this day.

But Waller Freith's arrest for murder, associated with the ghastly revealment made by Scroils upon his deathbed, dominated all my other thoughts at this present time, and what Lola La Touche had herself disclosed helped to confirm a thrilling suspicion in my mind, which gradually took stronger hold upon me. I kept that suspicion to myself, and waited

CHAPTER XXXI.

FOUL SECRETS

Foul whisperings are abroad : Unnatural deeds
Do breed unnatural troubles : Infected minds
To their deaf pillows will discharge their secrets.
God ! God ! forgive us all.

What need we fear who knows it, when none can call our power to account ? Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him ?

Macbeth.

THE wildest reports concerning Zollern's apprehension immediately filled the air like a sudden snow-storm. The new owner of Gaunchester-Haugh had been taken up by the police for outraging the family mausoleum ; he was a foreign conspirator seized on an extradition warrant ; he was a medical murderer in disguise, charged with having poisoned a patient. The last came nearest the truth, and yet was wide of it. But the flying grains of rumour quickly settled down into the solid substance of fact, and what I had already heard confirmed privately by Lola La Touche was put beyond a doubt to the world, that Heinrich Zollern was no other than Waller Freith, the late General Crutwell's son-in-law, and Mattie's father.

This extraordinary exposure created an immense excitement in the neighbourhood ; the startling news spread with amazing rapidity, growing like a snowball as it went, and receiving embellishments from every lip.

I was deeply anxious that the truth should be kept a secret from Mattie in her now depressed and highly nervous

state; indeed, I dreaded that if she knew of it, it might prove her death-blow.

Immediately upon leaving Miss La Touche I ran home to get a horse on which to ride over to the Priory as soon as possible, to put Miss Pridden and her sister on their guard against letting the intelligence reach my suffering loved one.

Whilst waiting for the hack to be saddled, I told my father all, and fairly took his breath away; but I had only time for a few hurried words, and then rode off to Mrs. Leghorne's house. But, alas! I was too late; my precaution was thwarted through the busy tongues of servants; Mattie had already learnt the dreadful news, and with the most disastrous results. She appeared at first to be stunned and stupefied, then her nervous system broke down entirely under the shock, and she was laid prostrate on a bed of sickness. I need say nothing of my awful distress and anxiety. It seemed as if Fate had decreed that we poor "star-crossed lovers" should drain to the lees the cup of bitterness. That my darling was now in the care of the kindest and most tender, loving friends I ever saw beside a sick-bed was the one assuagement of my mental agony, the sole consolation that saved me from distraction and despair.

But let me turn from that sad scene for a brief space, and tell what is necessary to the conclusion of this tale.

The charge of wilful murder against Waller Freith was no ordinary one; but it is undesirable and unnecessary to enter into the particulars of that charge, and sufficient to say that he had abused his profession by an illegal act, and thereby caused the death of a lady.

A large money reward had evidently tempted the unscrupulous scoundrel in his impecuniosity to risk the penalty of such an offence against the law; for, as it transpired

(with other points I give), he was in needy circumstances at the time; indeed, had never, owing to negligence and fast living, succeeded in his profession as a medical man. By the fatal result to his victim, he had forfeited that reward and incurred the penalty. Consequently, he had to fly from justice, and took refuge with Dame Carew (who had harboured him once before when in some other trouble), and there stayed until he thought the affair had blown over.

Meanwhile, in order to get money to take him out of the country, he conceived this daring scheme of going down to Gaunchester-Haugh in a skilful disguise (at which he was as great an adept as a theatrical artist), imposing upon his father-in-law as the friend of the disreputable Waller Freith, and worming first his way into the old man's heart and then his pocket.

By a curious coincidence of Fate, he arrived there on the very night that Mattie returned from the Continent accompanied by Lola La Touche; and having earned the General's gratitude by the supposed timely warning against an imaginary drunken fanatic, he enhanced the importance of his visit by working on the fears of the two girls to a barbarous extent, and making them believe that some deadly danger threatened the house.

The success of his whole project went far beyond his most rose-coloured hopes. The probability is that at first he only meant to stay long enough to get what money he required for the purpose of emigration; but afterwards, feeling pretty secure from pursuit, and finding how the land lay, he set to work to get the will changed entirely in his favour to the exclusion of his own daughter.

As to his professed guardianship of Mattie's interests, so plausibly pleaded by his fair confederate, I no more believed in that than I did in her good intentions.

The consummation of his greed was hastened by General

Crutwell's death, but that same event hastened also his own doom. By a strange dispensation—by one of those avenging accidents which are so often overlooked by and overtake the guilty, the name of Waller Freith, as mentioned in the butler's dying statement, having appeared in the press, the police were put at last upon the man's track, and by another strange fatality, the extreme irony of Fate, they actually apprehended him over his wife's grave. This had apparently only come about through the report in the newspapers of the magisterial inquiry, the particulars of the inquest having been curtailed from the local for the London papers with the omission of such name, as being considered, no doubt, trivial and unimportant.

Now that Freith had been caught and the mask snatched from his face, I anticipated further and fuller revelations concerning him; nor did I miscalculate; but what came to light was partly through his own confession—revelations of such a nature as to startle and horrify the world, more especially our small world, in which such a consummate villain had so lately moved and perpetrated his enormities.

Immediately after his apprehension, the chambermaid at the "Peacock" Hotel came forward and volunteered a piece of information, which proved an *avant-courier* to the ghastly facts of which we were soon to become possessed.

She stated that within the last few days she had found a wristband and other unconsumed portions of a shirt that had been partially burnt, in the fire-place of Captain Zollern's bedroom at the hotel. These portions, which were duly delivered up at the police-station, were dyed a deep red, as though they had been saturated with blood.

This last sensational item gave rise at once to the gravest speculations. What was this shirt, and why had it been burnt? Was it the one Waller Freith wore that night when he attended upon the wounded General? According to Harriet Scroils it could not have been, for she particularly noticed how free from stains he had kept his linen, seeing that he had been holding and nursing a person who had bled to death. Well and good; but it might have become in that blood-soaked condition during the night *after* she had seen it, and if so, this would account for the apparition of that fearful monster which had terrified the life out of her unfortunate husband.

Such was the conjecture—such the truth.

Briefly—for let me get over this repulsive part of the story as quickly as possible—Waller Freith was tried on the charge already mentioned, found guilty of wilful murder (which counsel for the defence vainly endeavoured to get reduced to manslaughter), and sentenced to penal servitude for life.

To him this was worse than death; he preferred to die; he would either do that or make his escape; and in a desperate but forlorn attempt to effect the latter, whilst working in the convict quarries at Dartmoor, he was shot down by one of the warders, and the wound proved fatal. But, happily, it was put into his heart to leave behind him a confession in exoneration of his daughter—probably the only redeeming act of his misspent life. This confession he scrawled in pencil on a piece of paper which he asked for a few hours before he breathed his last. He wrote:

"General Crutwell died by my hand. In a little while he will be avenged; I shall have followed him.

As one at the point of death I confess this, not with any hope of absolution at the last moment—for *me* there is no hope!—but for my daughter's sake, that she may be spared further pain and humiliation. In my belief she did not strike her grandfather with that letter-weight. The mark of blood upon it was accidental; it came from my own fingers when touching it after raising the General's bleeding head, but from its original position on the floor, it might as likely have been knocked off the writing-table in the scuffle. I saw that the wound on his forehead was not dangerous; I examined it, and, as a medical man, did not anticipate any fatal result. It was on sudden devilish impulse during his prolonged unconsciousness that I conceived the crime of murder; and so laid my plans. Having got the servants out of the way, I punctured the temporal artery myself, and the old man bled to death. But this took longer than I reckoned for, and during the efflux he became sensible and recognised me, for I had thrown aside my disguise, as I did at nights. Then with terrible yells he tried to rise, and struggled desperately, but I held him down until he was dead. When all was quiet I left the room and met the butler, who swooned away in terror at sight of me. I went to my room, changed my clothes, and then called up Miss La Touche. She was my accomplice whether she would or no—I had made her that—but softened our relations by fair promises. I told her to fly with Mattie immediately, and gave her full instructions and money for the purpose. This was with the double object of getting them out of the way, and concentrating proof of the act which had caused the General's death. Had any other suspicion arisen it might have proved fatal to *me*, whereas with a poor persecuted girl under extreme provocation I

knew it wouldn't go hard, even if they did bring it in manslaughter instead of misadventure. I quite expected the latter. These are my last words upon earth—they will free her, and with my last breath I ask her forgiveness.

"WALLER FREITH."

I need say little more about him. His confession opens the door; any one can step in now and look round, and understand each mysterious point that has gone before.

In very truth he was, by his own showing, the incarnation of subtlety, malice, and cold-blooded villainy.

It seemed utterly incredible that such a man could be the parent of a sweet, lovable girl like my gentle Mattie. But Nature deals in strange contrasts and contradictions; the loveliest flower springs from the deadliest plant; poisonous blossoms from nutritious roots; the roughest exterior may cover an angel's soul, whilst the blackest of hearts beats beneath the fairest bosom.

With that fatuity which many another criminal has shown, this man hung about the scene of his crime as though courting his own destruction. But it was greed for gold that kept him there—his newly acquired property, and also that acquired yet unacquired, the lost nine thousand pounds included in the will. He was doubtless divided in his opinion as to what had become of those bank-notes—whether they had been stolen by some person unknown, pilfered by the jackdaw, or hidden away by their hoarder when he was in a fit of somnambulism. Latterly Freith had inclined to the last belief. At any rate, that nice little sum was his if he could only find it; and though it might be like looking for a needle in a pottle of hay, it was worth the effort of a careful search. Had he not

been so bent upon this, he might have feared to risk his presence in that neighbourhood for another hour. But

> His mind was all intent upon his purpose,
> The while his eyes were fix'd upon the blade,
> Which sway'd and shiver'd o'er his scheming brain;
> And yet he stood as he would court the peril!
> Misguided fool!

Maybe he did not give the police credit for acting quite so promptly on their clue, or trusted to his inimitable disguise even if they did; whilst they, on the other hand, displayed considerable astuteness in "spotting" their man with such readiness and expedition.

How the fugitive girls were traced to the cottage in Exmoor Forest I never knew, but suspected that Freith himself had given surreptitious information in order to bring matters to a conclusion.

And now a last brief word as to Lola La Touche, his "accomplice," as he spoke of her in his confession, and I have done with this pair.

I went the next day after our interview by the tomb to call upon her at the "Red Bull" Hotel, as arranged, and to my astonishment found she had gone. I asked if she had left any note or message, but she had not, nor did I ever see her again.

My astonishment at this last step on her part, however, was only momentary. I scarcely needed any further explanation regarding the past, and putting this and that together, had little difficulty now in arriving at what was, no doubt, a correct conclusion as to the relations in which she had lately stood to Captain Zollern. His ambiguous sentence with reference to her in his confession was of itself almost enough for any one; and though he

did not actually compromise her honour in plain words, it did not require a very astute person to be able to read between the lines and arrive at the truth.

Thus had the man held her in his power, and under promise of marriage, and the specious pretext of securing the interests of all three, made her conspire with him against her friend. It was the old and painful story once more—the fate of the foolhardy (to use no harsher term), who persistently indulge in those perilous pastimes of skating on thin ice and sailing too near the wind, and pay the inevitable penalty.

Far be it from me to throw a stone at a fallen woman; I may leave that for her own sex to do—they will not spare her; but I must confess now that from certain hints Mattie had given me latterly, I had very strongly suspected that Lola La Touche was by no means a desirable companion for an innocent, pure-minded girl.

As I said, I never saw her again; but I heard of her some two years afterwards through a chance channel, which might or might not be reliable. I was told she had taken the veil, and had joined the Augustinian nuns in the Abbaye-aux-Bois. She may have done so, but I rather doubted it.

CHAPTER XXXII.

"THE NIGHT IS LONG——"

The day goeth down red darkling,
The moaning waves dash out the light,
And there is not a star of hope sparkling,
On the threshold of my night.

The wild winds of autumn go wailing
Up the valley and over the hill,
Like yearning ghosts round the world sailing
In search of the old love still.

Of Waller Freith's confession and fate, and of Lola La Touche's treachery and fall, Mattie knew nothing.

Her gentle friends at the Priory placed the strictest cordon round her, to prevent the chance of any further shock from ill-advised communications. But even had they not done so, she was far, far too ill to be made the recipient of news, or to be in any way conscious of what was passing in the world around.

The relief I felt at the weight of doubt being lifted off my mind by the convict's confession, was throttled at once by a new and greater agony of apprehension. A far heavier weight now bowed me down; I was racked by a daunting dread of what Fate still held in store.

Mattie grew worse from day to day. Low fever in a virulent form had taken firm hold upon her, and was sapping her young life slowly but surely, hour by hour. I was constantly at the Priory after the first

fortnight of her illness; I almost lived there. The kind-hearted sisters, who looked upon us as engaged, made me welcome to their roof, and did their utmost to alleviate my distress, and buoy me with hope when hope seemed gone.

With consuming anxiety I watched at his every visit the face of Doctor Rench, who attended the dear sufferer, and detected there an ominous look. At last I summoned nerve, and with faltering heart asked him "*Was* there hope?" He shook his head; he could not say yet; a feather would turn the scale; but while the fever haunted her weakened frame she was in peril.

Drear November went out howling and wailing; Christmas passed, a mournful mockery of the genial season; the New Year broke upon us with icy breath, binding the earth in a case of iron, and still Mattie hovered on the borderland.

I hung over that trembling life with the torture of suspense eating into my soul, and prayed my heart out to God that He would in His infinite mercy avert this desolating blow. For hours each day I watched beside the pillow of my dear one. Silently she lay all the long, weary time, with eyes closed, or fixed on some far-away object, her white, fragile hands extended listlessly on the counterpane. The fever had left her at last. It had left her, true, but oh, how changed! a mere shadow of her former self. Had the tenacious foe delayed his departure too long? Was it possible that now the poor prostrate victim could rally from his cruel ravages?

At intervals she knew me, and, with a look of ineffable love in her large, earnest eyes, smiled and whispered a word of encouragement to my sinking heart, her little

burning hand clasping mine, as though she would cling to life through me.

The tender sympathy of my dear old father at this grievous time was my greatest comfort. His kind heart overflowed at sight of that sad wreck of the bonny lass, who had taken her seat in that heart in defiance of all his prejudices.

Every day he came, and often twice. His beautiful, impressive prayers, deep-toned, but subdued to softest cadence, thrilled me to the soul in the solemn stillness of the sick-chamber; his fervid eloquence seemed to shower down upon us the manna of hope. As my loved one listened to him, a serene look overspread her sweet, wan face, but only to give way again to an inexpressible sadness.

It was evening; the prayer was over; deep silence fell once more upon the room. The sisters had withdrawn, leaving me alone with Mattie and my father. After he rose from his knees, he stood at the foot of the bed, gazing at us intently for several minutes. Presently I heard a great gulp in his throat; I looked up at him; there was a pained, profoundly thoughtful expression in his face, and the tears were scouring down his cheeks. I knew what he was thinking of; I knew of the inward contest that was going on; but he did not speak.

At length Mattie broke the long silence, and said to me, in a low, feeble voice, but distinctly audible in the quiet room:

"Darling, it is hard to go—so hard to leave you—after all; but without hope I—I cannot stay—and that—*that* is drawing me away from you, dearest, and——" A tremulous sigh arrested the remainder of the sentence.

"But, Mattie, there *is* hope! Oh, stay, dear one," I cried passionately; "there *is* hope!" She shook her

head mournfully. "Yes—listen, Mattie, you are free!" I exclaimed at last.

"Free! how am I free?" she asked, a supernatural light suddenly leaping into her dark eyes.

Then I hesitated. Oh, would that I could tell her all, that she could bear it; but until now my lips have been sealed on the dreadful past. I have not dared to recall it to her mind even to tell her this much. The doctor warned me that to breathe a word to her of that past might be fatal. And this very hopelessness is keeping her back! It is surely time, then, that she should know of her own acquittal—such knowledge might prove the turning-point at this agonizing crisis.

"Tell me, dear, how am I free?" she asked again in a quavering, eager whisper.

"You *are* free, my loved darling!" I answered cautiously; "the magistrate has reversed his decision, and all the world knows that you are guiltless."

"Oh, Athol, *is* it so——"

"It is."

"Thank God! thank God!" There was a pause—then suddenly she started, and cried out in a bitter, troubled voice, "Ha! but I remember—oh, I remember now—that horrible secret! that awful exposure and shame! Ah, yes, I know—I know now—I remember all!" She shuddered and closed her eyes, as if to shut out some painful vision—a piteous moaning broke from her, and she murmured hopelessly, "Ah, no, no, Athol—it can never be now—*that* must part us! I feel it can never be now, oh, my boy! my boy!"

Her tones of despair and anguish wrung my heart. She was looking from me to my father with wild, imploring eyes. He understood that look as I did. He

knew how I staked my life's happiness upon this earthly treasure; his bosom had ached to witness my silent, long-drawn agony; the harrowing grief, kept down for her dear sake with such an exhausting, superhuman effort, had touched him to the innermost core. I heard him muttering, with deep emotion:

"Oh, I canna bear it mair—I canna see them so!"—and in another moment he was by Mattie's side, her poor, thin little hand in his. "Mattie, my darling lass," he cried, in a choked, trembling voice, "forget a' that, I pray ye—dinna ye speak o' that again—let the past go for iver and iver! Get ye well, my lass, get ye well! Your love has conquered all! May God only spare ye to us for my lad's dear wife and my ain loved child!"

* * * * *

After dark vapours have oppress'd our plains
For a long dreary season, comes a day
Born of the gentle South, and clears away
From the sick heavens all unseemly stains.

It is spring, the birds are carolling blithely, the air is full of balm and sweetness, and we are sitting together at the open window of the very room where I lay for so long last summer hanging between life and death.

Mattie is in my mother's invalid-chair, propped up by pillows, and around her shoulders is a handsome Cashmere shawl—my second gift, more happy than the first. When safe to do so, we moved her from the house of the dear, kind friends who had nursed her with such unremitting, loving care, and brought her home to the Rectory—*her* home now until our marriage.

From the hour that light broke in once more upon her life Mattie rallied, though the reaction following on the

excitement of revived hope and joy retarded her steps in climbing the long ascent through convalescence to the point of perfect health.

But our prayers were answered, and she was brought safely at last through the dark, weary hours out into the rosy morn of a new and thankful day.

"The night is long that never finds the day."

"The night of sorrow now is turned to day:
Her two blue windows faintly she upheaveth,
Like the fair sun, when in his fresh array
He cheers the morn, and all the world relieveth:
And as the bright sun glorifies the sky,
So is her face illumined with her eye."

(*EPILOGUE*, *p.* 374.)

EPILOGUE

(1869)

"LOOK here, papa, what Attie and me's found!" I was standing one afternoon on the main lawn at Gaunchester-Haugh, waiting to take my wife for a row on the river, when our two children came running to me from the walks.

"What is it, Attie?" I asked, as my fair-haired little namesake approached with his sister.

"It's a pocky-book, I think, pa," said Athol the second, putting into my hands a mouldy, weatherbeaten-looking article.

"No, it's a pairse, papa," said dark-eyed little Elsie, the very counterfeit presentment of her mother. "We oped it, and it's got papers inside—you look!"

"Ha! where did you find it?" A thought swept across me.

"In the ivy, pa, behind that square thing," said Attie.

"No; *I* found it, papa!" cried Elsie. "We was playin' hide-and-seek, so I hid 'hind there, and I was snuggling down, and there it was underneaf me."

By heavens! the missing case of bank-notes! Yes, there they were; a compact bundle—wrapped in parchment, and preserved from all injury.

"Mattie, our little ones have found something," I said quietly, as my sweet wife now came to my side. "They've brought us luck to-day, my darling."

"What, dear?"

"Guess!"

"No, tell me——"

"The long-lost, by all that's wonderful!" and I put the soiled leather case into her hand. "The nine thousand pounds! Count them, Mrs. Kelso—they're your property, and none the less valuable for their associations—I think you'll find them correct! I congratulate you."

So there, in Mattie's old hiding-place, had lain all these years this buried treasure, to be brought to light at last by her own little daughter hiding in the self-same spot Verily, history repeated itself here to some purpose.

It was evident that the old General, prompted, perhaps, by some legend of Bartholinus or others in his dreams, had attempted to bury the money in the tomb that night whilst walking in his sleep, and, having failed to open the stone-work, had deposited the case instead in the ivy depths behind; and had then returned to the house, to be frightened out of his senses by waking suddenly and finding himself face to face with the supposed spectre of his son-in-law! And before morning that person in the flesh, under the guise of his honoured guest, had talked him out of what he had really seen, and into the highly imaginative idea that he had been robbed by his own grand-daughter.

To Mattie, as natural heir, on presentment being made to the Crown authorities, reverted the Gaunchester-Haugh estates and all the recoverable property under her grandfather's will. And here, in the old place, we have settled down into a blissful Darby-and-Joan existence (for I have

long since sold out of the Ninety-third), resolutely determined not to be haunted by the spectres of the past, or, if unable to forget entirely, agreeing to let those bygone woes "serve as sweet discourses in our time to come."

The story of our love thus overshadowed by mystery and crime is told. Mattie knows now why her mother was buried in that spot; but she will not have her grave disturbed, though the offer came from my father himself to transfer the remains to the family vault.

And to-day, from behind that monument of so much misery and sadness, our children disinter this golden link between the present and the past; and thus is cast up on the bright shores of our married life the last relic of the storm through which we passed together hand-in-hand, over that wide sea of troubles amidst whose angry waves my love was launched upon life's journey.

THE END

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